

# A Phenomenological Study of International Postgraduate Students' Feelings of Security in an Australian context

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## Abstract

*The paper is a study of international postgraduate students' feelings of security in line with the use of English as an international lingua franca in an Australian social and academic context. It focuses on how they perceive a feeling of security when they communicate in English with culturally different others, and which factors influence their perceptions of feelings of security. Findings deriving from in-depth interviews with 13 students from a non-native English speaking background from 11 countries suggest that they perceive a feeling of security subconsciously and consciously. Seven participants' perceptions of feelings of security were primarily influenced by subconscious display rules and taboo, secondarily by values of Confucian interpersonal harmony and competition. Six participants' perceptions were consciously and primarily influenced by the notion of 'face'. Findings further suggest that in the intercultural transition international students will be likely to experience a conscious process of negotiating face competence and face fellowship concurrently impinging their identity security. Confidence appears to be the key to maintain and restore their face and identity they want to present to others.*

**Keywords** international students, perception, security, taboos, face, interpersonal harmony

## Introduction

Over the last decade, Australia has witnessed a multitude of international students enrolling in higher education institutions. Enrolment particularly in the Higher Education sector apparently continues to increase, by 19% in 2007 and 20.7% in 2008 (Australia Education International, 2007-2008). This growth is the result of achievements in the internationalisation of higher education which has taken the form of globally recognised courses and qualifications being offered by Australian universities. In taking advantage of a globalised education, not only have international students invested their time and money studying in Australia but they also have taken a risk of moving from the security and familiarity of their homeland to the insecurity and unfamiliarity of a new country where intercultural encounters are unavoidable (Ting-Toomey 1999). If they have never studied in an English-speaking environment before and their cultural and linguistic backgrounds greatly differ from the Australian host, they will have more difficulty adjusting themselves than the ones who have had the experience and whose cultural backgrounds are similar to that of the host (Tananuraksakul 2009a). Students from a non-native English speaking background (N-NESB) appear to be affected most.

The adjustment is a challenging experience as learning to live and study in a new cultural setting is not easy even though it is for a limited period of time (Klomegah 2006). This is because it incorporates international students' well-being or their general satisfaction with their new lives (Kell & Vogl 2007). They find that much of what they have learned about interpreting the world around them suddenly becomes disorienting and frustrating (Furnham & Bochner 1986). Feeling disoriented and frustrated is associated with well-being or satisfaction during cross-cultural transitions (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham 2001). There is much research into student well-being during international students' initial transition from their homeland to a new social environment where language and culture are alien, yet research into their feelings of security has been overlooked (i.e. Sawir 2005;

Sawir et al 2007; Forbes-Mewett & Nyland 2008). This paper therefore seeks to examine international N-NESB students' feelings of security during an initial transition from their homelands to Australia. The definition of a feeling of security is culturally contextual; however, in the present context it is defined on the ground of self-confidence and self-esteem (Tananuraksakul 2009b). When they perceive that they are able to communicate well or successfully in English, they feel secure in themselves and gain self-esteem and self-confidence. If their perception is opposite, they feel insecure and lack self-confidence and self-esteem.

## Key Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following: 1) how N-NESB students perceive a feeling of security when they communicate in English with culturally different others, and 2) which cultural and linguistic factors influence their perceptions of a feeling of security.

## Methods

This study used in-depth interview techniques to investigate the feeling of security for international postgraduate students whose English is non-native during the transition from their homeland to Australia. The technique allows the interviewer to fully interact with each interviewee and receive his or her detailed information (Johnson & Christensen 2004). The duration of each interview was approximately half an hour. The following are examples of interview questions: 1) After your arrival in Australia, were there any cultural or linguistic barriers? 2) If yes, what were those barriers? 3) Did those barriers affect your feeling of security? 4) If yes, in what way did they affect your feeling of security?

After each interview, the author transcribed the interview and emailed it to the interviewee so that he or she could check whether the transcription was correct. Any incorrect transcription was revised accordingly. The process of transcription and revision assures the accuracy of the data, suggested by Kvale's (cited in Hess-Biber and Leavy 2006). The data were then analysed and commonly grouped into themes.

## Participants

A number of 13 volunteers from 11 nations participated in the interviews. All studied for a Master's Degree at a large university in Sydney and passed the minimum requirement of English language proficiency, IELTS. They all could recall their lived experiences in regard to communicating in English and its effect on their personal feeling in Australia although some of them had studied there for several months. They were assigned pseudonyms to guarantee confidentiality. Their personal information and pseudonyms are tabled below.

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Length of stay in Australia
1. Huang	China	1 year
2. Penelope	Colombia	1 year
3. Andy, 4. Rena	Indonesia	5 months, 10 months
5. Michiko	Japan	Over 1 year
6. Eunjoo	Korea	7 months
7. Antonio	Mexico	3 months
8. Michael	Peru	Over 1 year
9. Alana	Slovakia	2 months
10. Sean	Sweden	4 months
11. Jah, 12. Dang	Thailand	2 months, 9 months
13. Thien	Vietnam	4 months

## Findings

All participants indicated that they encountered cultural and linguistic barriers both inside and outside the classroom because of their unfamiliarity with Australian English, American culture and intercultural interactions through the medium of English. Their encounters affected their feelings of security both positively and negatively. The commonality of effects is grouped into two themes as outlined below.

### Theme One: An Unaware Feeling of Security

Thien, Penelope, Michael, Michiko, Jah, Dang and Huang see their negative feelings as a usual process of learning English. As a result, they did not think that the negative feelings created by their language barriers were a significant concern to them. Thien, for example, was stressed out during her first three months because she could hardly express herself and contribute her personal opinions to the class. She believed that her stress did not affect her feeling of security even though she just felt left behind in her study. In time, she was able to adapt to her study pace. When it came to her social life with classmates, she never felt stressed when she could not follow a conversation because it was something unrelated to her study. She said 'generally, [she did not] have such kind of insecurity because [of feeling stressed]'.

Unlike Thien, Penelope did not feel stressed but frustrated when she did not know how to express herself. Despite feelings of frustration, she did not think that this impacted on her feeling of security because she thought that she should just keep talking until others understood her. Although she considered herself a shy person, here in Australia she believed that she became a talker and wanted people to understand her. Jah and Dang felt the same way as Penelope in that frustration was not a serious matter to make them feel insecure. In fact, Jah described further that she did not need to feel insecure because other staff at her casual work were not academically competent in English so it made her feel relaxed. Dang viewed herself as an easy-going and this was the reason why she did not think she felt insecure.

Michael experienced more severe problems with English than Thien and Penelope since he felt depressed and unhappy and had a desire to return home. Although he claimed that his feeling of depression did not affect his feeling of security at all, he expressed himself optimistically in a high tone of voice:

affect my security?...no, not at all...it's OK...sometimes I felt pretty bad and wanted to go home because of the language problem but language was not the key determinant of my feeling...I thought I was learning and my personality was more like determined to say what I wanted to say...I [never took] it seriously even when some native people made fun of me or took advantages of me and my English was OK.

Michiko expressed how much she was worried about her future because of her cultural belief in study abroad which would assist her in acquiring English. She said 'in Japan, many people believed that study in an [NESB] country for 3 months [would] assist them to speak like a native...not [her]'. This apparently bothered her because she had already studied in Australia for at least a year and perceived that her English was not improving any more. She judged her competency upon her comprehension in the lectures. Despite feeling negative, she did not admit that her feeling of security was affected negatively by her cultural and linguistic experiences. She reasoned that being a teacher herself reminded her that learning English would not be easy at her age and everybody would experience this same negative feeling. If she were much younger, she presumed that she would be able to acquire English more easily.

Huang tried to protect herself from being affected by intercultural contacts. In doing so, she set up a barrier between herself and other international people as a means of protecting herself. She shared that she was afraid that if she communicated with other international people, misunderstanding may occur and offend them. For this reason, she had chosen to avoid making conversation with international friends so as to avoid any possible conflict. Intimate talks would only be initiated among Chinese friends because it was easier to express herself in Chinese and this made her feel confident.

### Theme Two: An Aware Feeling of Security

Rena was the only participant whose confidence in English appeared to be high as she has never considered her English problematic. This positively affected her feeling of security. For Eunjoo, confidence equalled security and she considered it an important matter to communicate in English. She honoured one of her classmates who had high confidence in English although he did not speak English fluently, he did talk a lot. She wished she could be as confident as him. Sean felt insecure and frustrated in a new environment when he could not express himself. He thought it was because '[he] was constrained by the language...felt like more stupid. It's like diminished intellectually'.

During his first month at the University, Andy felt insecure to some extent because he knew that his assignments would not reach marks as high as his native classmates. Unlike Andy, Antonio felt 'a bit desperate' when he had to ask for clarification, repeating the same question made him feel 'in a way insecure' because he had studied English for years and thought he should know the language. Yet, he added that he was not familiar with Australian English.

Feeling excluded from the group was inevitable for Alana who felt unhappy and uncomfortable living under the same roof with her American housemates. This unpleasant feeling made her feel 'a bit insecure' because she did not want to be different in the first place, but they looked at her and treated her as if she were not part of the group.

## Discussion

All participants from culturally diverse backgrounds encountered cultural and linguistic barriers during their transition from their homelands to Australia. The two themes identified through an analysis of their responses demonstrate either an awareness or unawareness of this perceived feeling of security. Themes one and two therefore answered the first key research question. In theme one, seven participants did not perceive that the psychological effects of their negative feelings, namely stress, frustration, depression and worry, impacted on their feelings of security when they communicated in English with culturally different others. This suggests that the way they perceive feelings of security is rather subconscious due to their 'internal process whereby [they] convert the physical energies of the world outside of them into meaningful internal experiences...that world embraces everything, [they] can never completely know it' (Samovar & Porter 2003, p.11). Further, they used their sensory receptors to interpret what they see, smell, taste, hear and feel. On the other hand, in theme two, one participant in particular perceived a high level of confidence in her English performance which positively affected her perceived feeling of security. Five other participants perceived that the psychological effects on their negative feelings, such as uncertainty, insecurity, desperation, frustration, stupidity, exclusion and unhappiness, negatively affected their feelings of security. This suggests that the way they perceive such feelings is rather conscious.

Themes one and two also answer the second key research question in that the participants' interpretations of the world are influenced by their cultures giving them criteria of perception because of a set of values they live by (Samovar & Porter 2003). Some of those values tend to permeate a culture which is known as cultural values. Cultural values are usually based upon the distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, proper and improper and the like. The function of these cultural values is to inform members of a culture of what should be practiced and what should not be followed. In theme one, seven participants subconsciously perceived that their negative emotion did not affect their feelings of security perhaps because the expression of emotion was considered taboo or culturally prohibited. Their cultures may prescribe when and how they should express their emotions, known as display rules (Gallois 1993). Taboo occurs when an individual's act brings discomfort or harm to themselves or to others (Allan & Burridge 2006). Neither cultural display rules nor taboo is explicitly codified. As such, when it does occur, there is no visible symptom, but being silent may indicate it (Krajewski & Schröder 2008).

As a result, those aforementioned seven participants subconsciously reacted to their negative emotion in a way that would not cause them or others to lose face. This may be because they may want to have their attributes well perceived by others (Miller 2002; Samovar & Porter 2003). The context may be taboo around the notion of face which was an ultimate value uncommonly open to discussion or argument (Hofstede et al 2006). Although Penelope, Dang, Michael and Huang believed that their personality positively impacted on their perceptions, their cultural display rules or taboo may have subconsciously guided their perception and behaviour. Michiko was the most obvious case. Coming from a Japanese background, the values of face and face work deeply lie behind her social interactions (Irwin 1996) that it was her seniority, not her inability, inhibiting her in acquiring English. Coming from a Chinese background, Huang's perception may have been greatly influenced by Confucian values by guiding her behaviour to carefully seek harmony in relationships with others and through social integration (Ng 1998/1999). Jah's perception was additionally influenced by a competitive value in that her colleagues' academic language skills were considered lesser than hers. As a result, there was no need to feel insecure. This suggests that there may be relations of power and identity between her and them (Norton 2000), rendering her linguistically and socially superior to them though they come from the same ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

In theme two, Rena was confident in her English which made her feel secure while it was the opposite case for Eungoo. Self-confidence is a personality trait and an important determinant of motivation which can lead language learners to proficiency in a target language (Clément & Kruidenier 1985; Richard-Amato 1988). Although self-confidence drives language learners' motivation and success in language learning, other factors that influence over their perceptions may be deeper. Goffman (1967) states that individuals commonly are aware

of 'face' and have a desire to 'maintain' or 'gain' face. Face is how they present their identities when interacting with others in a situation. In the same vein, Lim (1994) views face as the positive public image individuals claim for themselves. As such, Ting-Toomey (1998) posits that face is inescapably tied to individuals' emotions of social self-worth and the social self-worth of others. When they experience a conflict that is their face is threatened, they will feel vulnerable and lose face. When they lose face, they use facework, specific verbal and nonverbal behaviours, to negotiate, maintain, enhance, restore or save their face.

'Competence' face, a desire to appear intelligent, accomplished and capable (Ting-Toomey 2005) appeared to influence Rena's and Eunjoo's perceptions of feelings of security. This influence similarly accounted for Sean, Andy and Antonio. Sean for example felt 'unintellectual' because he was being constrained by his English. Andy believed his English proficiency could not compete with his native classmates, and Antonio expected that the length of his English study should equip him with better English skills, but it did not. Alana's perception, in contrast, was influenced by 'fellowship' face, a desire to be seen as accepted and loved (ibid). This suggests that during the intercultural transition N-NESB students will be likely to encounter a conscious process of negotiating face competence and face fellowship concurrently impinging their identity security. Confidence appears to be the key to maintain and restore their face and identity they want to present to others.

## Conclusion and recommendation

This study investigated international postgraduate students' perceptions of security and the factors influencing their perceptions during their initial transition from their homelands to Australia. Findings indicated that although all participants passed the minimum requirement of the English language proficiency test for postgraduate admission, they encountered cultural and linguistic barriers that affected their personal feelings. They subconsciously and consciously viewed the barriers as effects on their feelings of security. While the participants whose perceptions were subconscious were influenced by cultural display rules and taboos, Confucian interpersonal harmony and competition, the students with conscious perceptions were influenced by 'competence face' and 'fellowship face'. These are cultural values which are abstract and rooted in their beings and they directly influence intercultural contacts. This implies that the participants' cognition affects their social psychology which is a feeling of security or a feeling of confidence in the present context. It also implies that perception towards the feeling of security is culturally contextual. This study contributes ideas for people who work with international students that would assist them to better understand the students' both psychological and physical well-being after transitioning from the security and familiarity of their homelands to the insecurity and unfamiliarity of Australia. Hopefully, this may further inspire them to design a psychological tool to support students (if they do not have one yet).

The study has a number of limitations. It is restricted by the small sample of 13 N-NESB students. The study needs to be quantified by a larger number of students from N-NESB in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of their perceptions of a feeling of security and factors that influence their perceptions.

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