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Classroom Experiences of International Students in Canadian Postsecondary Education

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the classroom experiences of 12 international students in a Canadian postsecondary institution. The literature related to this purpose shows that many international students are challenged by the English language proficiency needed for analytical classroom discussion, and they are often confused by Westernize student-centric learning tactics such as oral presentations and open-ended assignments. Grounded within qualitative phenomenological research, our study documents the lived classroom experiences of international students and how they interpret social learning exchanges. Based on semi-structured individual interviews, the findings reflected three main themes. First, international students faced challenges with deciphering the English language of local students and teachers. Also, they struggled with the quick response time needed for classroom discussions. Second, many international students were frustrated with mandated group work. Many students felt discriminated against by their group members; other students experienced unbalanced workloads when completing collaborative assignments. Finally, students experienced a steep learning curve regarding the Westernize student-centric approach to learning. For example, many students were intimidated by creative assignments and the associated lack of direction provided by the instructor. The findings of this research are analyzed via Bandura's social cognitive theory, which dictates that effective learning is dependent upon personal agency (one's actions), proxy agency (the

environmental resources), and collective agency (group dynamics). Currently worldwide, burgeoning numbers of international students are streaming into Western postsecondary institutions accentuating the need for this research. These institutions have an ethical and financial obligation to supply high quality education to international students. However, to provide a supportive learning environment, instructors, administrators, and educational policymakers need to be knowledgeable of the learning experiences of international students and adjust their institutional culture and pedagogical tendencies to best suit the needs of these students.

Keywords: class discussion, group work, classroom presentations, student-centric learning, social cognitive theory.

Introduction

Many scholars have researched the academic, pedagogical, learning, and social experiences of international students in Western postsecondary institutions (Preston, in press; Preston & Wang, 2017; Tavares, 2021). However, to fully understand these studies, the terms "international students," "Western," and "postsecondary" need clarification. Herein, international students are defined as "students who study at higher education institutions outside their countries" (Corrigan, 2014). Historically, the term "Western" is associated with a societal philosophy that emerged from Europe during the "Age of Reason," during the 17th and 18th century (Preston, 2019). The Western society is an evolutionary influence predominantly converging into present-day, English-speaking, economically driven societies (Eisenstadt, 2001). Last, postsecondary education refers to any level of institutional study after completing high school (e.g., trade schools, colleges, and universities). For the purview of this paper, the terms "postsecondary education" and "higher education" are synonymous.

Research based on international students in Western postsecondary institutions commonly spotlight the educational, personal, and acculturational adjustments and negotiations students experience when immersed in a Western postsecondary program. Unfamiliarity with the academic and social norms of a new country and its postsecondary institution often makes it difficult for international students to comfortably, effectively, and easily navigate within the new environment (Iorga et al., 2020). In contrast, living and learning abroad is often accompanied by many positive experiences, too, because it often promotes personal growth, independence, and self-confidence (Guo & Guo, 2017). Whether faced with challenges or new-found enthusiasm, when enrolled a postsecondary program, international students embark on a journey involving the demystification of new academic ideologies and idiosyncrasies of their host surroundings.

Partially due to globalization, transnationalism, and technology, a recent worldwide trend spotlights that burgeoning numbers of international students are flocking to Western postsecondary institutes. For instance, over the past decade in Canada, international postsecondary student enrollments have tripled (Statistics Canada, 2020). More currently, during the 2021–2022 school year, Canada's postsecondary institutions attracted 400,521 internation students, the highest number in Canadian history (Statista, 2023). While the increased presence of international students creates a more vibrant, multicultural postsecondary environment, this diverse group of predominantly English as an Additional Language students also initiates novel institutional and educational demands. If institutes are to deliver high quality education to international students, research related the lived experiences of international students within postsecondary education is necessary, justified, significant. Research provides the knowledge needed to effectively teach, assess, and serve international students, and such research provides instructors, administrators, and policymakers with a better understanding the lived realities of international students. Accordingly, with this grounding, educators and educational leaders

can effectively adjust their institutional vision, culture, and practices to best suit the unique needs of the international student population.

Over the decades, numerous researchers have conducted studies to document the challenges faced by international students. However, this study is specialized in its research location (e.g., Atlantic Canadian university), pedagogical focus, and current application. Few studies have been conducted in Eastern Canadian, which target the pedagogical and learning experiences of international students, post-Covid. This research fills that gap.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the classroom experiences of 12 international students who pursued a postsecondary degree in Canada. To achieve this aim, this paper is divided into five parts. As background information, a short literature review specifies common classroom experiences of international students in postsecondary education. Next, we introduce the paper's theoretical grounding, Bandura's (1986; 1997; 2002) social learning theory. Then we supply a methodological overview of the qualitative research paradigm, the mode of data collection, the mode of data analysis, and details pertaining to participant involvement. We articulate the findings through three main themes pertaining to English dialogue in the classroom, group work, and student-centric learning. The findings are discussed, and the implications and limitations of the research are provided. We end by providing recommendations for future research.

Literature Review and Theoretical Grounding

Language and Communication

A common challenge encountered by many international students enrolled in Western institutions is English language proficiency (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018; Bai & Wang, 2022a; Gomes, 2020; Heng, 2018; Hu & Gao, 2021; Igwe et al., 2020; Jackson & Chen, 2018; Ma, 2022; Ogunsanya et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2018). Tavares (2021) explained that multilingualism is tied to successfully navigating within diverse social contexts and via dynamic communicative practices. This point is mirroed in Jackson and Chen's (2018) mixed-methods, multi-national study involving 123 survey respondents and 19 interviews; international students identified fast-paced classroom discussions as the most challenging component of their learning experience. Foreign English accents and local jargon exacerbate language barriers for many international students (Bai & Wang, 2022a; Gomes, 2022; Heng, 2018; Jiang & Altinyelkan, 2022; Lindner & Margetts, 2022; Matsunaga et al., 2021; McGarvey et al., 2021; Ploner, 2018). Moreover, when international student possesses low levels of English competency, they often experience academic stress, low mental health, loneliness, depression, and/or anxiety (Koo & Tan, 2022; Ma et al., 2020; Martirosyan et al., 2019).

Many studies found that international students lack confidence when speaking to their teachers and peers during class (Bai & Wang, 2022b; Kerridge & Simpson, 2021; Lindner & Margetts, 2022; Wan, 2021; Wang & Freed, 2021). Sometimes, international students feel incompetent, uncomfortable, anxious, embarrassed, or shy to speak in English; in turn, they remain silent (Jackson & Chen, 2018). In Igwe's et al.'s (2020) British study with 45 international undergraduate students in a business program, local students dominated group discussions and, largely, disregarded the views of international students. This finding coincides with the results of Matsunaga et al.'s (2021) qualitative research where Japanese students felt sidelined by local students who dominated class discussions. In Ge et al.'s (2019) Canadian research, international student participants believed that instructors tended to promote greater dialogue from the local students, as compared to international students. In Lee's (2019) research with Korean international students, the participants perceived their English ability as inadequate for dialogue-infused classrooms, because they needed time to translate questions and responses from English to Korean and vice-versa. Thinking and translating in a second language is a time-consuming

process, which often takes longer than the wait period provided by instructors and classmates (Heng, 2018). Moreover, the reluctance of some international students to become orally engaged during in-class discussions is often erroneously recognized by instructors as student disinterest (Heng, 2017). Often, unintentionally, instructors and institutions foster a culture of silence for international students by not providing the educational supports needed for them to experience rich, insightful, inclusive classroom discussion and learning.

These findings highlight that, for international students, using contextualized and local forms of English language are fundamental needs for both a constructive postsecondary experience and an overall sense of personal satisfaction. However, the above research does not attempt to further interrogate and explain these challenges through the lens of a holistic learning experience, which includes the role of self, the role of surrounding people, and role of the greater learning society. Our research uses Bandura's (1986; 1997; 2002) concept of human agency as a threshold to help explain how international students can use their personal skills, abilities, culture, emotional and spiritual power to overcome postsecondary challenges in Western institutions.

Westernized Pedagogy

Many international students are bemused by unique Western teaching methods and learning expectations. For example, international students are often confused by student-centric learning activities such as personalized assignments, class discussions, local case studies, group work activities, oral presentations, and creative projects (Bai & Wang, 2022a; Cena et al., 2021; Leong, 2017). In Heng's (2017) American study involving Chinese undergraduate students, participants described their home country's educational norms (e.g., exam orientation, teacher-directedness, memorization of content, lecture format, etc.) and cultural tendencies (e.g., respect for authority, community over individual, etc.) in vast contrast to their host classroom's learning approaches. Broad assignment guidelines, which instructors utilize to promote student-centered learning (Newsome & Cooper, 2017), can be a great source of frustration for international students who are not accustomed to such independent learner freedom. In an Australia study involving Vietnamese students, participants expected their teachers to lecture and provide direct answers to questions; instead, their instructors created open-end learning activities and told students to find their own answers (Bai & Wang, 2022b). The issue raised in these studies is that student-centered pedagogy is a specialized learning culture; it is not automatically understood by many international students (Kaya, 2020; Lindner & Margetts, 2022; Matsunaga et al., 2021).

Regarding writing, international students are often challenged with specialized Western genres and reference styles. Academic writing is a culturally imbued style of communication. It is perceivably dry, sharp, and literal. Comparatively, for example, Chinese writing more poetic in its discourse (Bai & Wang, 2022a). In Heng's (2017) research, participants were not accustomed to using a persuasive, often abrupt, literal style of writing with a clear introduction, the main body with arguments, and a strong conclusion. In Rao's (2017) study, international students had difficulty stylizing their academic papers to include a thesis statement, topic sentences, and conclusion statements. In Ravichandran et al.'s (2017) study, international participants identified some of the challenges of Westernize writing to include specialize English grammar, academic vocabulary, standardized formatting, the flow or transition of information, the critical thinking process, the formulation of an argument, the provision of evidence, and the formation new and concluding ideas. For many international students, the writing styles and genres typically enforced within their home countries vividly clash with the academic English writing expectation of Western universities (Qin & Uccelli, 2020).

Critical thinking is often incorporated into the Westernized style of academic writing. This skill employs the ability to reason, judge, analyze, argue, justify, and effectively communicate information. Not only do most Western institutions require that critical thinking be woven into student writing, many instructors erroneously assume students have mastered this skill. In Li's (2016) qualitative study, international students did not understand what it meant to be a critical, as opposed to a factual, writer. In turn, such writing is foreign and frustrating (Lucas, 2019; Samanhudi, 2021; Zhong & Cheng, 2021). Furthermore, some international students consciously or unconsciously perceive the critiquing of subject matter akin to challenging or defying the knowledge of instructors or published scholars—an act that is disrespectful, impolite, and/or inappropriate in some cultures (Rao, 2017). Consequently, some international students do not question or dispute curricular content. Instead, they respectfully agree with instructors, people in authority, classmates, and/or published literature (D'Cruz, 2022; Zhong & Cheng, 2021; Zhou et al., 2023), blocking the critical thinking process.

This research shows that academic learning for international students is situated in and structured through the dominant educational culture of the English-medium postsecondary institute. This education prioritizes the local culture's pedagogy and promotes a Westernized learning style, while simultaneously acknowledging such learning as the correct way to gain educational knowledge and experiences. In promoting Westernized student behaviors, postsecondary institutions delegitimize most other styles of learning. In sifting through these studies, one blatant gap that persists is addressing how students can utilize their abilities and skills to successful navigate in what can be a debilitating learning environment. Through the theoretical discussion of the finding, this study addresses that void.

Social Cognitive Theory

This research is epistemological grounded in social cognitive theory (aka social learning theory), which describes how a person's lived environment influences a person's behaviors and beliefs. Via social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986; 1997) stated that knowledge and the creation of a worldview occur via the social experiences and interactions of people, behaviors, and environments. Social cognitive theory distinguishes three modes of learning agency: individual, proxy, and collective. Personal agency (aka self-efficacy) is exercised individually, where people use their authority to influence their experiences. Importantly, personal agency does not embody the abilities and skills one has; rather, it incorporates faculties and talents that a person believe they possess (Bandura, 2002; Bandura & Locke, 2003). Sometimes, people do not have direct control over the conditions influencing their learning. In these situations, they exercise socially mediated agency (aka, proxy agency), which includes access to social and physical resources. Finally, to exercise collective agency, people work collaboratively with interdependent effort and synergy to pool knowledge, skills, and resources. This study targets the embodied, situated, participatory experiences of international students in a Westernize postsecondary program. The theoretical discussion of its findings relies on a sociocognitive approach where the personal, resource-driven, and interpersonal environments are inextricably and indispensably intertwined with the participants' lived stories.

Methodology, Research Design, and Data-Related Information

Methodologically, this study is situated within the qualitative research paradigm, which derives meaning from lived experiences, specific contexts, and selected individuals. Qualitative researchers explore the world in its natural, holistic, complex state. This research is about exploring the intricacy of daily social interactions, how people ascribe meaning to social exchanges, and how participants interpret experiences. As Marshall et al. (2022) explained, "Qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people" (p. 2). Moreover, this qualitative philosophy aligns with the phenomenological research design attached to this study. Phenomenology

aims to uncover what several participants, who experience a similar phenomenon, have in common (Creswell, 2017). Phenomenological researchers explore both what (e.g., objects, actions, etc.) and how (e.g., thoughts, feelings, and images) a phenomenon is experienced by participants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

For this qualitative phenomenological study, we conducted one semi-structured individual interviews with 12 international graduate students from one Atlantic Canadian university. The average duration of interviews was 60 minutes each. Eleven participants were enrolled in a graduate program or had graduated within the past 12 months. One participant was enrolled in a Bachelor program. Of the12 participants, five were from Africa, two were from China, one was from Vietnam, one was from Latin America, one was from North America, one was from the Middle East, and one was from Russia. An overview of participant information is presented in Table 1 below. To protect the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used instead of real names and the homeland of participants is identified either by a country or a geographical area. Also to promote data credibility, participant quotations were extracted from interviews and threaded into the findings explanation.

Table 1

Participant Description here. (See last page of this document.)

Pseudonym	Home Area*	Program	Interview Length in Minutes
Janet	Ghana	Master of Arts	49
Gideon	Ghana	Master of Business Administration	67
Peter	West Africa	Master of Business Administration	67
Wendy	Nigeria	Master of Business Administration	51
Ruby	Russia	Bachelor of Business Administration	60
John	Ghana	Master of Education	60
Mike	Vietnam	Master of Education	60
Paula	China	Master of Education	88
Eve	China	Master of Education	69
Nattie	Latin America	Master of Education	45
Sophia	Middle East	Master of Education	35
Mary	North America	Master of Education	69

The data transcription and analysis involved several steps that accentuate the reliability of the data. After the interviews were conducted, we personally transcribed each interview verbatim. In other words, we did not use a technological program. We view the action of listening to the interview and personally transcribing each word as an important initial step of data analysis. After transcription, to support trustworthiness and credibility of data, the participants were emailed their transcripts and asked to member check the document (Birt et al., 2016; McKim, 2023). This process involved each participants reading the transcript and changing, altering, adding, and/or deleting any information that they deemed appropriate (Candela, 2019). After the transcripts were member checked for content validity (Candela, 2019), we analyzed each transcript through content analysis (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Selvi, 2023). To do so, each transcript was read in its entirety to gain an overall understanding of what was said. Then, guided by the research purpose, each researcher created a list of themes/topics and sub-

themes/sub-topics that surfaced from the transcripts and that addressed the research purpose. The frequency of similar topics and the overlap in common words were of particular interest. Another important component of our data analysis is that after each individual researcher analyzed the transcripts, collaboratively, we met to discuss the overarching similar themes that transpired within the separate analyses. When discrepancies in themes and sub-themes arose, we reviewed the transcripts again, discussed the issue, and agreed on the final findings. For us, high quality content analysis meant involved becoming intimately knowledgeable about the data through the manually creation of transcripts, repeatedly reading the transcripts, and doing iterations of coding both individually and collectively.

Results

When addressing the research purpose, "What are the classroom experiences of international students in a Canadian postsecondary program?" three dominant themes emerged. The first theme focused on challenges related to classroom discussions. The second theme spotlighted frustrations associated with group work. The last theme was documented the need for participants to decipher the meaning of student-centric learning. Below, we explicate each of these findings.

Challenges with Classroom Discussions

Most participants spoke about how the specialized and working knowledge of the English language, especially during classroom discussions, challenged them and often deterred them from speaking during class. Nattie said that she enjoyed listening to and learning from classroom discussions, but she, herself, did not participate in many of them. She explained, "The language barrier was something that scared me … I wanted to say something that was really valuable, but I just listened and waited for the others to answer." Similarly, Sophia explained that, during classroom discussions, she just wanted to "learn from listening." With that said, Paula believed her level of English deterred her from speaking during class. She stated, "English is a barrier. Sometimes, it is very hard to express my ideas in English. I have to transfer it from Chinese to English and then put it out of my mouth." During class discussions, Peter was self-conscious when articulating his views. He explained, "The main barrier was to speak … in the classroom, when we had discussions about a certain topic and someone gives a different answer, I use to keep quiet and agree to whatever they say." Regarding classroom discussions, Mike shared his frustration. He believed that even though he had the English words and solid grammar knowledge, these skills were not enough to fully explain what he wanted to say. "Sometimes, it doesn't come out in the right way in English. Sometimes, we want to speak up; we don't want to stay silent, but we translate word by word." Ruby added, "When you don't have enough vocabulary, miscommunication might happen." Ruby continued by saying that she often remained silent, because she did not want others to misinterpret her.

Even though most participants articulated that it was difficult for them to participate in classroom dialogue, three participants expressed that they were keen to speak up during discussions. Eve believed she dominated many of the classroom discussions, and questioned, "Why do I always want to grab the microphone?" Mary said that she never shied away from a good classroom discussion. Wendy explained that, after being in the program for a while, she become comfortable with classroom discussions and thoroughly enjoyed them. However, other than these three participants (whose English was exceptional), participants indicated that they primarily listened to classroom discussions and debates, and they learned a lot from being a passive participant.

Also, with regard to discussions, a common frustration reported by most participants was the difficulty understanding the English accents of classmates and instructors. Mike explained that when he worked in groups, due to heavy accents, he only understood what his non-native English classmates

were saying about 70% of the time. John described a similar scenario when working with a group member who had a different native language than him. Paula believed much of the classroom miscommunication she experienced was due to English accents. Paula also explained that she learned British English, and, sometimes, she would be misunderstood because of her choice of British words within a Canadian university. Ruby, Nattie, and Janet reported that the heavy non-native English accent of their instructors was a great challenge for them. Ruby explained that she had a math class where the local English-speaking students had difficulty understanding the instructor. She added, "What about us?" Nattie talked about one of her instructors and said, "When he started to talk, I didn't understand anything. It was like, 'Please god, give me ears, because I don't understand.'" Janet echoed Nattie's point when she said, "He [the instructor] was talking so fast, and I couldn't get what he was saying."

For most participants, one of the most frustrating components of their postsecondary program was group work. For example, both John and Ruby were extremely annoyed because their group partners did not complete their share of the assignment, and John and Ruby believed they needed to assume a leadership role and remind their group members to hand things in on time. John explained, "The challenges that go into the group presentations and the cultural background and differences in worldviews, well, that was the biggest barrier [of the program]." Mike did not like group work, either. Mike and John agreed that it was difficult to schedule group time, because "my teammates are very busy with their jobs" (Mike), and "It's difficult getting a hold of people" (John). Mary was upset with group assignments, because she stated she had to do most of the work. Peter and Gideon provided more details about why they were disappointed with group work experiences. Peter reported, "We had problems in most of the groups … Our work ethics are not the same, so it is always confusing. Also, you come out of the groups without learning anything." Gideon explained, "When we are to work as a group, we all had different ways of doing things," and these contrasting tendencies created friction. Eve and Wendy questioned the value of group work. They explained that the work was divided among the team and "each one does two or three slides to present" (Eve). "We just allocate slides to each person," (Wendy). They believed this type of group work was not conducive to deep learning. Mary ended by explaining that she earned higher marks when working independently. Gideon also believed he would receive higher marks if he could just work alone.

Furthermore, five participants, Mike, Peter, Gideon, and Janet described how they were ostracized, intimidated by, or discriminated against while working in groups. When doing another group assignment, Mike said:

> *They [group members] care about the good results. Maybe they want to get a stable job after graduation, or they want to pursue a PhD. They omit some students. They think some students are not good enough to belong in their group. They think we bring them down.*

Similarly, Peter felt uncomfortable with group work. He said, "That was during a group project … I really felt excluded, even though I participated in the project, I wasn't able to do whatever I wanted to." Gideon said, "I was in a group of three, so it looks like the two were teaming up against me … 'Why is it that if the other person presents his ideas, we accept it, but you don't want to accept mine?'" Janet felt that group work promoted discrimination. She described this issue:

> *When I bring my paper for group work, they have to change everything, because they think that this how you should have expressed yourself. Meanwhile, they didn't read what I read. They didn't go through my experiences. They don't know what I want to put down, … They felt that this is not correct. You are not good enough … They felt that they are better off, because they speak good English and are able to express themselves better … They sit down and edit every sentence. They were racist.*

Mary and Mike explained how they found group work stressful. “At the very initial beginning of any group work, I always have a mini heart attack. I think, ‘Oh my gosh’, who am I going to find? Who is going to work with me?’” (Mary). Mike said, “I couldn’t find a group member to do a group project … The exclusion feeling is tough for me to get over.” Paula suggested that instructors should “let students decide to do it [assignments] alone or to team up.” John made a similar comment to Paula. Eve and Mary believed that students should not be forced to do group work. Interestingly, every participant interviewed did not like doing group work.

Deciphering Student-Centric Learning

Learning Tactics of Home and Host Countries. To fully understand how the participants viewed Western pedagogy, it is important to describe to the teaching pedagogy and learning tactics of home countries. Sophie explained how she was educated. “They [the teachers] used the blackboard to give you information. You had to be quiet. There was no interaction. You had to memorize everything and put all the information back on the test paper. Then you will succeed.” Similarly, Paula and Nattie talked about their experiences. “In Asia, the teacher controls the whole classroom. They just teach and ask questions about the content of the class. … All students do is to learn it, write on the paper, and finish the exam,” (Paula). “The teacher shows the class what he or she wants them to learn. Then the students receive the information, and, at the end, the students do a test to score the learning,” (Nattie). Peter explained what it was like in Africa. “Back home in [name of country], they give you all the information. You just have to memorize it and reproduce it during exams.” Gideon explained, at home, student learned the content “verbatim, memorizing everything,” which is referred as, “we ‘chew and pour’” in his home country. For Gideon, memorizing everything was the “chew;” and producing everything, when asked, was the “pour.” All participants described similar teacher-centric tendencies in their home countries.

Participants went on to compare and describe the student-centered experiences of their Canadian program. Many participants found the host learning tactics confusing and/or frustrating. Peter explained that in his program, students were responsible for their own learning. “Here in Canada, … they [instructors] come do the introduction and expect us to find the answers by ourselves.” Paula found student-centered education strange:

> *In China, you just do exactly what is in the books or what the teacher told you to do. The first time I was having this class from Canada, I was just feeling like, “I can think whatever I want, but I still don’t know if it is right or wrong. I was confused all that time.*

Wendy said, the “The professors don’t actually say you’re wrong; they just try to change your perspective through discussion.” Sophie said, “Here, it is about exploring your abilities … Everything is acceptable. It’s acceptable to draw instead of writing. It’s acceptable to perform a play. It depends on your own way, not the professor’s way.” All students explained that student-centric learning was not something that naturally or instantly understood. Rather, it took time for them a while to comprehend and successfully navigate through what participants perceived to be a strange learning process.

Many students explained student-centric learning often intimidated them. Nattie stated that, at the start of the program, “I was in shock. I was like, what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to learn? Why do we need to do that in that way? What do they want me to say? What am I going to think?” Ruby explained why she was uncomfortable with the student-focus. “[Back home] students know that if they are wrong, or, if it is not supported by the majority, they will be bullied. I hold that same kind of feeling in me, here. I don’t like to raise a point that isn’t supported by someone else.” John explained why he thought this type of learning was frustrating. He said:

They [students] may be saying something that is totally different, and the instructor is there nodding, as if whatever is being said is in line with what is asked. At times, I get discouraged, because sometimes there are right and wrong answers, but the instructor doesn't correct them.

Mike explained, because student-centric learning focuses on the individual interests and abilities of students, it can only produce generalized course knowledge for students, as a whole. He disagreed with the premise. He explained that he enrolled in his Masters program to be specialized in an area. "For some courses, the teachers assign broad readings, but each reading does not have a strong connection with each other … What benefits can students get after doing the course if it's so general? … I find it very confusing and very useless." Janet was also confused by this new way of learning and provided an example. For one class, the instructor asked students to read a paper; the students discussed it the next day during class. Janet was prepared to discuss the facts in paper, but she was surprized by what happened:

I was ready to only speak about the paper. I knew the content well, but I realized that people were taking it from different angles. They were connecting it to the some different topic that they knew. Even though I was confused, I went home, reflected on it a little bit, and I was like "Maybe I should have read more, or maybe I should also embrace the different perspectives."

In general, student-centered learning was something students were not accustomed to. Many students found this type of pedagogy frustration and personally unbeneficial. A few students (like Janet) recognized that student-centric learning could be advantageous for personal growth.

Class Presentations

Another type of learning pedagogy many participants talked about was class presentations. Gideon stated that student presentations was a major component of his program. "There were classes where we only go there to do presentations. Presentations were part of the training, so we did presentations based on the subjects or topics given to us." Participant appreciation for presentations was somewhat mixed, but, overall, most participants either learned to enjoyed them or saw them as, at least, somewhat valuable.

Many students stated that, at the beginning of their program, presentations were challenging and uncomfortable. For example, Peter said, "The first time standing in front of people, I was so stressed and just wanted to get out of that place. To be frank, it was horrible." Due to the lack of English language confidence, some participants were intimidated by presenting. Sophia said, "The presentations, they were overwhelming. I didn't trust my English. What if I speak wrong? I was not sure of my English. I didn't know if my English would be acceptable." Mike explained, "When I moved here, the feeling of making presentations is stressful. That is, I need to be very careful about the language I use to make sure that it doesn't hurt the listener." Ruby described her experience presenting in front of the class. "In Russia, it [doing presentations] was easier, because it was in my native language. I know I can find a similar word in my head if I forget a word, but here it's harder." Paula explained that when she first did presentations, she documented everything she wanted to say on each slide. "However, after that, my professor told me that I can't do that. I just learned that I have to talk more and just put key words on it," (Paula).

Although participants were intimidated by English language feature of presentations, many participants believed that, overall, the presentation experience and content was valuable. Eve said, "Giving presentations is very effective. It can be good and useful for building memory. It's long-lasting." Nattie commented, "This [a presentation] was something that challenged me to express myself." A couple of participants, Janet and Gideon, did presentations in their home country. They were comfortable with presentations. As Gideon said, "I wasn't scared … In [name of country], I used to

present in front of my teammates, so that skill has been built over the past years." Once participants had done a few presentations, many made comments like Peter and said, "I really enjoyed them."

Discussion

Past and Current Study

The data revealed three general themes from the view of participants: classroom discussion unfairly accentuated the input of local students. Group work was frustrating, and it ostracized many international students. Because international students need time to fully understand and embrace its concept, student-centric learning unfairly elevated local students, Some of the details of these findings mirror the results of past studies. However, some of the details of the findings offer new knowledge.

To start, similar to many past studies (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018; Bai & Wang, 2022a; Gomes, 2020; Heng, 2018; Hu & Gao, 2021; Igwe et al., 2020; Jackson & Chen, 2018; Ma, 2022; Ogunsanya et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2018), this research reinforces the idea many international students feel ostracized during classroom discussions, because international students need time to articulate their thoughts in English. As well, many past studies document that international students struggle with foreign English accents and/or local accents (Bai & Wang, 2022a; Gomes, 2022; Heng, 2018; Jiang & Altinyelkan, 2022; Lindner & Margetts, 2022; Matsunaga et al., 2021; McGarvey et al., 2021; Ploner, 2018). This study supports past finding. Finally, similar to past studies, (Bai & Wang, 2022a; Cena et al., 2021; Leong, 2017; Newsome & Cooper, 2017), in this research, many participants felt frustrated with student-centric assignments and activities. Many participants felt student-centric activities generalized the knowledge content of courses and reduced the quality of their program.

In additional to supporting existing research, this study offers new findings for scholars to ponder and further explore. First, the result of this study showed that many international students did not enjoy group-work activities. They found these collective assignments degrading, because the local group members devalued international knowledge, experience, and input. This point has not been exposed in known past studies. However, some past studies have indirectly contrasted this point. For example, Zhou's et al. (2023) research advised instructors to intentionally incorporate culturally and linguistic group assignments, so students social integrate and gain a better understanding of each other. Student frustration pertaining to group work has not been exposed in past studies. Overall, research about mandating international students to do group work needs further investigation. Also, there a lack of research explaining in practical terms (as opposed to theoretical discourse) how an instructor and students can realistically create inclusivity, respect, and trust, all of which are needed for effective group work, among a culturally diverse class of students.

Another finding revealed from this study that has not commonly surfaced in past research pertains to classroom presentations. As applied to the participants of this study, most international students initially found presentations extremely stressful, but they later enjoyed doing them and viewed them professionally and personally beneficial. They continued by explaining that because presentations were such a popular course assignment, they quickly learned how to give a presentation, and they found this skill beneficial. This is another area upon which further research is needed.

Social Cognitive Theory

Living and navigating in a new country with its diverse and foreign culture is difficult for most people; however, when simultaneously enrolled in a postsecondary program, additional challenges are generated. This research highlighted the complex situations faced by international students studying at a Canadian postsecondary institution. The participants of this study experienced new, unique academic

expectations, foreign learning experiences, and unfamiliar social and pedagogical tendencies. Social cognitive theory pertains to human agency and successful functioning within cultural embeddedness (Bandura, 2002). Bandura (2002) explained, "To be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (p. 270).

With regard to personal agency, Bandura believed that people need to use their personal influence (e.g., emotional energy, physical energy, knowledge, psychological wellness, etc.) to directly influence their actions and manipulate their surroundings. As applied to this study, in managing their academic learning, international students took the personal onus to step into uncomfortable situations—to become involved in classroom discussion, to navigate the value and purpose of group work, and to learn to become proficient in conducting presentations, for example. For the most part, the data supported the idea that participants effectively used their personal agency, their drive, their will, their work ethics to be successful as they could in their program.

Bandura (2002) also stated that, in many spheres of life, people do not have direct control or direct influence over the social conditions, practices, and resources surrounding them. When enrolled in a Western program, the international students of the study were placed in learning situations, which were largely dictated by instructors and the pedagogical norms and customs of the host institution. Under these situations, Bandura believed that students needed to access their valued outcome (i.e., academic success) through exercising proxy agency. Bandura said that proxy agency is a socially mediated type of agency, for which "people try to get those who have access to resources, expertise or who wield influence and power to act at their behest to secure the outcomes they desire" (Bandura, 2002, p. 270). However, in this study, other than using the resources from their teacher and potentially listening to (mostly) local classmates during classroom discussions, it was challenging for international students to access and use proxy agency. Participants were new to the host county and did not have personal or academic connections to/with local resources. Moreover, participants' educational experiences were affected largely by language barriers, cultural adjustment, and a lack of experience with student-centric instruction. These challenges exacerbated the access to and usage of proxy agency. For instance, intricate knowledge of English and differences in accents and jargon created communication gaps during classroom discussions. International students' participation in class discussions depended on their understanding of the language and accent used, both of which the participants had no control or agency with. We argue that class discussions in a multicultural classroom are only sometimes (at best) a true reflection of international students' knowledge and abilities. International students sometimes accept certain concepts and ideas, not because they agree with the discussions, but because they are not supplied with the resources, time, or assistance to express their views in English. They need to access more proxy agency, and it is the responsibility of instructors and institutions to provide this resource.

As applied to this study, Bandura's (2000) collective agency can be directly linked to the participants' views about group work. Bandura explained that the overall perceived collective efficacy of any group resides in the individual minds of group members. An effective, efficient group is dictated by each individual person of the group acting cooperatively within the realms of a shared group belief. In this study, participants, for the most part, spoke negatively about their group experiences. They expressed favoritism of individual assignments over group assignments. When describing their group work experiences, several participants described their perceived group contributions as worthless. Personally, they felt socially excluded and, academically, they felt their work had little value. Bandura (2000) explained that a group cannot achieve its full potential if it is composed with people plagued by self-doubt about its members' abilities to assume their role and complete their tasks. In contrast, the higher the perceived collective efficacy, the more the group motivationally invests in the task at hand. Groups with high perceived collective efficacy, work more effectively when facing challenges and setbacks. In light of this study, potentially, the negative experiences of participants were because group

assignments needed to be completed in a short, set timeframe; perhaps, there was not enough time and effort extended by all members to develop a shared belief needed for collective agency. In sum, when assigning group assignments, instructors and students, first, need to learn about and understand the benefits and merits of collective agency.

Limitations of the Research

They are limitations attached to this the study. That is, there are restrictions over which the researchers had no control. First, because we were the sole research instrument for data collection and analysis, the data were influenced, to a certain extent, by us. With that stated, an integrated aspect of this limitation was the advantage that we were able to be more responsive to context. For example, during interviews, we immediately processed aspects of the data, we were sensitive nonverbal communication, and we asked for clarification and summarization of information all of which created enriched the findings.

Another limitation pertains to generalization. The nature of a phenomenological, qualitative research denotes a small sample size. Therefore, generalization of results cannot be bestowed beyond this study. However, the context of the study was richly described to help readers judge the transferability of the results to similar contexts.

Although we believe social cognitive theory is a powerful analytic tool aligned with the purpose of this research, it would be negligent to ignore the limitations of the theory. Social cognitive theory is an abstract, complex, philosophical concept, and it is explained, interpreted, and defined differently among academics. Consequently, there is no consensus on what it is or how it is measured.

Conclusions and Implications

Postsecondary educational institutions need to be aware of the complexity of the challenges faced by international students and establish myriad supports that promote high quality learning and a smooth transition to living in a new environment. As explained by Helms (2015), international students need to experience relevant curricula, pertinent classroom learner activities, and be privy to social supports that meet their unique needs. The intricate connection between culture, education, teaching, and learning cannot be overstated (Lum, 2006). The implications of this research emphasize the importance of culturally sensitive instructional strategies and calls for the institutionalization of a conducive climate supportive of international student academic achievement and personal development. In other words, institutions need to provide supportive environments where Bandura's three types of agencies can be accessed, internalized, and used by international students. A full explanation of how to obtain these efficiencies is beyond the realms of this paper, however, a few institutional suggestions and examples can be provided.

To promote the personal efficiency of students, students need to be comfortable and supported in their new environment. Such a grounding supports self-esteem and diminished self-doubt. Associated with building personal, proxy, and group efficiency, institutions need to help international student integrate into campus and community life by potentially establishing welcoming and information hubs located within the institution's campus. Both international and local students should participant and/or help the organization of events and access of local and cultural information. Social events including food (e.g., pancake breakfast, campus barbeques, etc.), pep rallies, and university sporting events should spotlight cross-culture music, entertainment, and dress. Postsecondary administration need to be a leading force in instigating that a variety of social clubs, welcoming international students, be established on campus. For these and other events, university administration need to be proactive in supporting international students and their integration within an inclusive student-friendly campus

environment. To address challenges related the social isolation and ostracization of many international students, universities should provide potential homestay experiences for international students, provide information related to local volunteer opportunities, and promote on-campus local-international student bubby events. With regard to language support, fortunately, many postsecondary institutions offer some language classes, programs, social events to assist international students. However, with the surging international student enrolments reflected by many Westernized postsecondary institutions more effort should be devoted to expanding these activities. Also, these institutions need to provide professional development and support for instructors pertaining to cultural pedagogy. Instructors need to understand that common Western pedagogical practices are not often understood by international students. The academic and social events that promote self-confidence (personal agency) of international student, that help international students access local resources (proxy agency), and help international students find and work with social groups (collective agency) support the overall success of international students.

Suggestions for Future Research

There is still great need for future research pertaining to the experiences of international students. First, future research needs to address the holistic lived experience of international students. For example, what types of supports bests serve the academic, emotional, physical, spiritual, cultural, linguistic, collective, and community needs of international students? Second, research needs to focus on how to create and maintain culturally sensitive, learner-focused environments for international students. For example, what pedagogical technique are most beneficial for international student successful and wellbeing. What are the potential merits of group work, as they pertain to a culturally diverse group of postsecondary students? What are the merits of class presentations, as they pertain to a culturally diverse group of postsecondary students? How can instructors, administrator, and policymakers value the diverse knowledge and backgrounds of international students to create inclusive learning environments? Third, we believe international student success is a communal effort. A conceptual visual framework, nested in international student success, needs to be united with Badura's concepts of personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency. Such a framework would provide a much-needed philosophical grounding for Western postsecondary institutions that want to ensure the holistic health, happiness, and successful of its international students.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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