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Thai Doctoral Students' Layers of Identity Options Through Social Acculturation in Australia

Singhanat Nomnian

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An increasing number of international students in Australian higher education have inevitably increased linguistic and cultural diversity in the academic and social landscapes. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory and Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) identities in multilingual contexts, this study explores how Thai doctoral students adopt certain identity options during their societal acculturation while studying and living in Australia. Based on a group of nine Thai doctoral students' interview transcripts, the findings reveal three intricate and complex layers of their identity options, namely, assumed identity as Asian people, imposed identity as 'Non-Native-English' speakers (NNES), and negotiable identity as Thai ethnic people. This study potentially sheds some light for future empirical and longitudinal research regarding NNES international students' social acculturation in different multilingual settings in order to support NNES students' academic, linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptations.

Keywords: Australia; Identity Options; Higher Education; Social Acculturation; Thai Doctoral Students

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INTRODUCTION

Language, culture, and identity are key aspects in language use and mobility. In terms of situated locations, language users who move to various places will encounter different sociocultural practices; and thus, they construct and negotiate themselves in particular interactive contexts (Pennycook, 2012). International higher education mobility continues to rise as the degrees and cross-cultural experiences obtained while living and studying abroad can strategically and competitively fulfill career goals and future employment expectations (Beech, 2015). Due to the socioeconomic benefits that an increasing number of international students bring to Australian universities, it is imperative that they obtain high quality education experiences. One of the contributing elements to educational quality is how well they transit from their home country to the Australian higher education system (Phakiti, Hirsh, & Woodrow, 2013). Menzies and Baron (2014) report that smooth international postgraduate transition is not only influenced by appropriate university support, but also by student-based support through student societies where friendship and interactions can be promoted. Effective social transition and acculturation can positively assist them in making a successful academic adaptation.

Previous studies, however, report a number of difficulties and challenges for international students, particularly in English-speaking countries (e.g., Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Elliot, Baumfield, & Reid, 2016; Fotovatian, 2012; Fotovatian & Miller, 2014; McMahon, 2018; Nomnian, 2017a; Zhang & Mi, 2010). These include lack of awareness of university policies and practices, implicit academic expectations of lecturers, and incompetent communicative English skills. Australia, in particular, is considered as the most multicultural among developed nations thanks to migration and international student mobility (Guillen & Ji, 2011). Australia, as a result, comprises a mixed multicultural and multilingual population who speak 'localized' versions of their own variety of English, which may not meet the expectations of international students who would like to immerse themselves with 'Native-English-Speakers' (NES) (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 187). Phakiti et al. (2013), nevertheless, claim that English proficiency is not the only factor, and that other personal variables including self-efficacy, personal values, academic difficulty, motivation, and self-regulation, lead to academic and social success of international students.

Studies regarding Thai postgraduate students' identities in Australian universities have been documented over the past years (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Kettle, 2005; Koehne, 2005; Nomnian, 2017b, 2017c; Pimpa, 2005; Srikatanyoo & Juergen, 2005). Nomnian's study (2017b) highlights identity narratives of a Thai mature doctoral student, who was a former politician which were related to the academic and social contexts that impacted on his personal and academic growth and satisfaction. Thai doctoral students' academic practices were underpinned by the implicit power of their supervisors, which required culturally sensitive supervision and academic and sociocultural orientations in order to meet university norms and supervisors' expectations (Nomnian, 2017c). These studies revealed the complexities involved in Thai students' academic adaptation to disciplinary discourse and the implications for teaching and learning in Australian higher education. They explored Thai students' academic experiences as they constructed and negotiated their identities to meet the respective disciplinary requirements of their courses.

International students' overseas higher education mobility is not only for instrumental purposes, but also builds and demonstrates personal characteristics as international students are required to adapt themselves physically, mentally, and linguistically to the new sociocultural lifestyle (Bista, 2018). They need to establish social networks, develop English language proficiency, and enhance intercultural communication skills that can satisfy their prospective employers (Beech, 2015). Although Australia is a multilingual and multicultural country, few studies have been conducted regarding how 'Non-Native-English-Speaking' (NNES) international students acculturate and integrate in terms of their identity construction and negotiation in relation to their discursive practices in this linguistically and culturally diverse society. I argue that Thai students in Australia represent an ideal case for an investigation of such identity construction. This study aims to suggest how and in what ways Thai doctoral students' identity options play an essential role in their discursive practices, and how interactions with local people can potentially affect their social acculturation while they are studying and living in Australia.

BIO-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS AND IDENTITIES IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS

This study employs Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory with the extended study of international doctoral students' enculturation and acculturation perspectives proposed by Elliot et al. (2016), and Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) identities in multilingual contexts, which will be discussed in detail.

The bio-ecological systems introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1979) is a way of holistically understanding the notion of human development focusing on how an individual's unique and active interactions within layered multi-systems, including the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems, crucially influence one's growth and development. The individual is located at the core of the microsystem where close and direct interactions with one's surroundings such as family, university, and workplace initially take place; the mesosystem is later formed from the constituents within the microsystem. The outward growth and development continues to emerge through one's workplace, social network, and community. These situated sociocultural contexts are located within the exosystem and extend towards the macrosystem of the wider culture and subculture dealing with one's beliefs, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, lifestyles, opportunities, risks, and life trajectory. Embedded within each of these broader systems, the individual's cultural knowledge and beliefs are mainly responsible for his/her identity construction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Regarding the chronosystem, Bronfenbrenner (1979) values temporal milestones such as changes in the family structure, marital status, and employment as important steps in human development. It is, thus, interesting to explore these different layers which interact and interconnect within and among sociocultural, historical, political, and professional contexts, to illustrate the complexity of the individual's unique development through the course of his/her actions and interactions in a particular time and space.

Extending Bronfenbrenner's concept (1979), Elliot et al. (2016) claim that international students' time abroad disrupts their own multi-level ecological system that was the accepted norm prior to contact with a new ecological system through an alteration of sociocultural conventions, norms, practices, and social support. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems highlights the transition of international doctoral students in this study via complex incidences as they temporarily move to an environment with different societal, cultural, academic systems, language(s), and daily interactions. Elliot et al. (2016) address two key concepts, *enculturation* and *acculturation*, with regard to international education, which can potentially cause challenges for students whose overseas study involves learning in different sociocultural settings and where there are different academic norms. Enculturation refers to thoughts, language, and common practices acquired through initial exposure to the original ecological system of the home culture over a number of years, which is imprinted in the student's psychological frame of reference. Acculturation, on the other hand, is often a cause of tension as the student needs to conform to the new ecological system that requires personal introspection to learn, unlearn, and/or re-learn new ideas, thoughts and behaviors in order to survive, thrive, and flourish in the new academic and sociocultural contexts (Elliot et al., 2016). For instance, regarding international students' acculturation experiences, Smith and Khawaja (2011) identified

main stressors including language barriers, educational difficulties, loneliness, discrimination, and changing environments. These could be mitigated by social support and coping strategies dealing with psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Asian students in English-speaking countries in particular might find it difficult to make friends with locals compared to their European counterparts because Asian cultures are typically collectivistic, interdependent, and relationship-oriented, whereas the Western cultures are individualistic, assertive, and independent (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This study, however, employed the concept of acculturation as it focused on the Thai students' transition and adaptation from Thai to Australian sociocultural contexts.

To scrutinize how Thai students construct and negotiate their identities as legitimate speakers of English in Sydney, which is considered one of the world's most multilingual cities, it is crucial to understand how language users' identities in multilingual contexts are constructed and negotiated, which can be explained by Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) conceptual framework. They claim that, in multilingual contexts, there is a conflict between linguistic ideologies and identities in terms of language choice and its varieties influenced by particular groups of people in certain contexts. Language choice and attitudes are, therefore, associated with political arrangements, power relations, language ideologies, and interlocutors' perceptions of their own and others' identities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In other words, the way Thai students in Australia speak English could indicate what 'types' of persons they are. This not only depends upon what 'types' of persons their interlocutors are, but is also determined by the implicit variables including power relations and linguistic ideologies existing at a particular time and in a particular context.

Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) characteristics of identities in multilingual contexts are useful for this study because they suggest a variety of factors that can affect Thai students' identity construction and negotiation in multilingual contexts in Australia. There are five characteristics: (1) the interplay between linguistic ideologies and individuals' use of linguistic resources to indicate their identities; (2) the fact that these identities are embedded within local and global power relations; (3) identities can be multiple, fragmented, and hybrid due to the influence of different variables, such as, age, gender, ethnicity, language, and social status; (4) identities can involve a process of imagination to create new identities, and finally; (5) identities can be represented through individuals' narratives (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Identity options, which are *assumed*, *imposed*, and *negotiable*, have a significant impact on each individual to take up various positions under certain sociocultural circumstances (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

Assumed identity is contextually constructed, valued, and legitimized by the imposing authoritative persons or institutions. Imposed identity is constructed when individuals are not able to negotiate, resist, or challenge imposing authoritative persons or institutions at any particular point in time. Negotiable identity, on the other hand, is constructed when individuals feel imposed upon, devalued, or misunderstood by particular persons or institutions and, thus, they contest and resist the imposing persons, groups, or institutions. Although each identity option is categorized, these three identity options in multilingual contexts require an analytical lens through which to decipher how dynamic, complex, and fragmented identities

can be. Individuals, therefore, contextually construct, (re)negotiate, and take up their desirable identity options depending on their personal background, interpersonal relationships, and interactions with their interlocutors and surrounding sociocultural environment (Nomnian, 2017a).

Individuals who do not share cultural assumptions or values are likely to (re)negotiate their relations and identities in such multilingual settings because they have different ideologies and frames of reference when interacting with each other (Wei & Hua, 2013). Nomnian (2017a), for instance, suggests that Thai postgraduate students' participation or withdrawal from particular interactive situations was due to their perceptions of their spoken English and that of others, as well as, due to power relations existing within and outside classrooms. This consequently affected their positioning when they communicated with others in multilingual contexts. They were caught in a web of complexity regarding the way they tried to strike the balanced identity positions that could allow them to construct and represent themselves as legitimate speakers of English (Nomnian, 2017a).

This study focuses on Thai doctoral students' layers of identity options resulting from different degrees of identity construction and negotiation depending on their exposure to diverse interactions and experiences in particular social settings. The importance of sociocultural contexts is associated with language users' sociological and psychological strategies regarding their language use in a particular linguistic ecology (Haugen, 1972). These three identity options are, therefore, changeable, shifting, and fluctuating. It is, however, important to note that a particular identity option legitimized by one group in a particular circumstance may not necessarily be accepted by another group or even the same group at a different point in time and space because of the shifting and fluctuating characteristics of identities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Setting and Participants

A case study approach was employed in this study because, according to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2017) and Yin (2017), it can serve as an empirical enquiry to explore a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context of an individual unit which can be a person, a class, or a community. Located within a qualitative, interpretive research paradigm, a case study can be viewed as personal and subjective, which potentially demonstrates a complex and dynamic reality of individual experiences (Denscombe, 2014; Holliday, 2016).

The research setting was an Australian university located in one of the most multicultural and multilingual cities in Australia. The selection of the Australian university in question was for practical reasons as it was the host university of the researcher, who at that time was granted the Endeavour Postdoctoral Fellowship by the Australian Government. This Australian university is one of Australia's top young research universities not only with strong academic and research collaborations with a number of universities in Thailand, but is also well-known among Thai students and scholars in science and technology disciplines. This study thus highlights various interconnected factors underpinning the complexities of the particular evolving

sociocultural circumstances that Thai doctoral students encounter. It requires the researcher to be more process-oriented, flexible, and adaptable to changes and challenges. It is important for researchers to understand, engage with, and reflect upon their study in order to read the data from different interpretive perspectives through the use of interviews that provide insights into the participants' on-going life trajectories (Denscombe, 2009; Mason, 2018). The following table offers a brief summary of the Thai doctoral research participants in this study.

Name	Gender	Age (years old)	IELTS Overall Band/ TOEFL	Previous Job in Thailand	Funding Type	Previous Education Degree(s) From a Thai/Foreign University	Current Degree(s) at an Australian University	Years of Living and Studying in Australia
Nathan	M	36	6.5	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Computer Science) Thai university	MSc (IT) PhD (IT)	7 years
Alex	M	43	5.5	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Computer Science) MSc (IT) Thai university	PhD (IT)	more than 3 years
Bob	M	43	6.0	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (IT) MSc (IT) Thai university	PhD (IT)	4 years
Kim	F	37	6.0	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Computer Engineering) MSc (Computer Engineering) Thai university	PhD (IT)	5 years
Bee	F	35	6.0	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Applied Statistics) MSc (Applied Statistics) Thai university	PhD (Applied Statistics)	more than 1 year
Peach	F	37	5.5	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Maths) MSc (Maths) Thai university	PhD (Maths)	more than 2 years
Rain	F	34	5.5	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Nursing and Midwifery) MSc (Nursing and Midwifery) Thai university	PhD (Midwifery)	more than 1 year
Amy	F	38	n/a	University lecturer	Thai university	BA (Accountancy) Thai university MA (Accountancy) US university	PhD (Accountant)	4 years
Charlie	M	32	99/120	Scientist	Australian university	BSc (Biology) MA (Museum Studies) Australian university	PhD (Environmental Science)	2 years

Table 1. A summary table of Thai doctoral research participants. (Nomnian, 2017c, p. 34).

According to Table 1, a group of nine Thai doctoral students, five females and four males, 30-45 years old, from academic disciplines comprising engineering, IT, midwifery, mathematics, applied statistics, accounting, and environmental science voluntarily participated in this study. All of them had graduated with a bachelor's degree from a Thai university, previously worked at a Thai university, and received grant. Seven students were funded by the Royal Thai Government. Another one received funding from her Thai university whereas the last one was granted by the Australian university in question. The length of their study period at the university varied from one semester to four academic years. Based on the interpretive and qualitative research paradigm, the participants' construction of meanings in their complex sociocultural contexts is understood via interpretation rather than generalization, prediction, and control (Flick, 2014). The Thai doctoral students' construction and negotiation of identities in societal acculturation while living and studying in Australia were, therefore, determined and qualitatively interpreted without generalizing the findings in comparison to other cases.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed semi-structured interviews because it allowed the personalized adaptation of main questions to the participants' view. In accordance with Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, and Silverman (2004), there is no need for researchers to adhere to their prepared interview structure and thus can ask additional probing questions to follow-up on the participants' particular responses to gain deeper perspectives and understanding. In this study, the main interview questions concerned the respondents' personal background including education, careers, and current degree qualifications, as well as reasons for studying at an Australian university. The respondents' expectations, their perceived academic and conversational English proficiency, and attitudes towards their use of English with 'native' and 'non-native' speakers of English were then explored. The interview questions also addressed Thai students' views on social activities, characteristics, sociocultural adjustments, and culture shock, impressions of the linguistic and cultural diversity, and main challenges they faced living in Sydney.

These questions were designed to gain an insight into the students' thoughts, emotions, plans, motives, and expectations leading to recognition of each individual's construction and negotiation of identities during the societal acculturation. Identities in this study could be analyzed from the interview transcripts. According to Davies and Harré (1990, p. 62), identities can be represented in talk and through talk between an interviewer and an interviewee as they engage in dialogic exchanges. Each participant agreed to be interviewed for an hour at their chosen location. The interview was conducted in Thai or English depending on the preference of each participant, and digitally audio-recorded. All the interviews were transcribed and translated by the researcher. Both Thai and English transcripts were later returned to the participants for validation prior to data analysis. To comply with institutional research ethics standards required by both Thai and Australian universities, the participants' data was kept highly confidential; and pseudonyms were used for all participants.

This present study adopted thematic analysis to enable the researcher to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. There are six steps to thematic analysis: familiarizing oneself with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Based on Pavlenko and Blackledge's identity options (2004), three main identity types with key aspects were identified and presented in the findings.

FINDINGS

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) multi-layered systems, Elliot et al.'s (2016) acculturation process, and Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) identity options in multilingual contexts, the findings expose the layers and complexity of the social acculturation process and reveal the three main identity options available to this group of Thai doctoral students (see Figure 1).

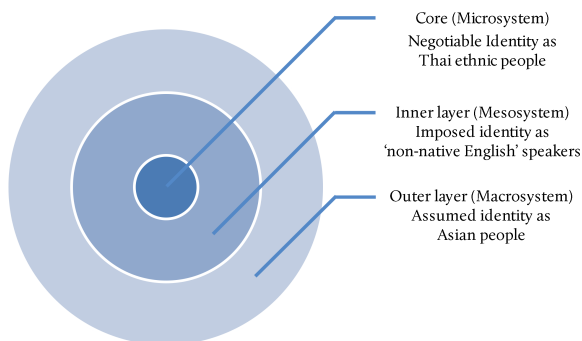


Figure 1. Three main identity options of Thai doctoral students. (figure by Nomnian).

The findings reveal three main identity options, namely *assumed*, *imposed*, and *negotiable* identities, which were constructed on different layers from the outer and inner circles to the core, respectively. Each identity option was contextually constructed and negotiated under situated discursive practices depending on where and with whom the interactions of each Thai student took place. Each identity option will be presented as follows.

Assumed Identity as Asian People

The Thai doctoral students' assumed identities were contextually dependent. They felt comfortable living in Sydney since their identities were valued and legitimized by the prominent Asian community, which enabled them to become more aware of different Asian ethnicities including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, and Thai. This led to their increased recognition of an Asian identity. Bee, for instance, viewed Sydney's central business district (CBD) as an Asian community where the majority of Asian people were encouraged through their languages used in public and through their physical appearance, especially their black hair.

In the CBD, there is a mixture of Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Japanese. There are many people with black hair like me, and that makes me feel comfortable. (Bee)

Amy considered Sydney as a mixture of different ingredients rather than a melting pot because each Asian ethnic group and nationality still retained their own collective sociocultural identity. Yet, she positively felt that people there were sociable, relaxed, and easy to be friends with.

Sydney is very linguistically and culturally diverse. Some people consider Sydney as a melting pot, but I disagree with that. The diversity doesn't melt together in the same pot. There is a mixture of different ingredients because the same nationalities, such as Chinese and Thai, stick together. But I think it's somehow easy to tune in to one another. People here are easy-going. (Amy)

Likewise, Alex also felt happy living in Sydney as an Asian city where he could engage with Thai and other Asian cultures, enjoy Thai traditions and Chinese New Year, even if Australian culture was not always on display, except on television.

I live in Sydney, where Asian culture is quite prominent. There are Thai traditional festivals in which I can engage, like the Homage Ceremony for the Late King, Loy Krathong, Thai temples, and merit making. I think it's good. It's like killing two birds with one stone. You can learn about other cultures in the same location. However, I don't see much of Australian culture in my daily life. I only learn it by watching news on TV. (Alex)

Feeling homesick at the beginning, Bob gradually acculturated, immersed himself into Australian society, and became accustomed to life in Sydney; as a result, he considered himself a local now.

At the beginning, I felt homesick. Nowadays, I am used to living here. I think to myself that I have already become the local. I have gradually adjusted my eating, living, learning, and communicating. (Bob)

Initially, despite being nervous about living in Sydney, Peach felt that she had to be flexible in terms of adapting to the new culture where an Asian community facilitated her acculturation.

Sydney is truly multicultural. There are Arab, Chinese, and Thai people. I can learn about diversity. I have gained more experience living among people from different nationalities. I need to be flexible and adapt myself to different cultures to live together. If I live in a country where there is a strong local culture with fewer Asians, I may need to adjust myself a lot more than I do in Sydney. (Peach)

Rain voluntarily took the 'risk' of living with an Australian host family as she wanted to gain first-hand experience of Australian culture. She chose to adapt to their 'house rules' such as having dinner on time, watching television for an hour

after dinner, and joining in the family's religious activities at Easter and Christmas as a way to acculturate herself to a 'typical' Australian family.

My host family is a retired Italian couple who have lived in Australia for more than 50 years. I have to rush to get home as I have to have dinner with my host family. If they don't understand my English, they will correct me. I can learn Australian culture and slang which I sometimes don't understand. After dinner, I watch TV with them for an hour. Sometimes they ask me what's on the TV. They will also tell me about Australian history. They celebrate Easter by hiding chocolate. They let me join Christmas with their family. If I want to learn more about Australian history, they advise me watch *Crocodile Dundee*. We also watch Australian channels. (Rain)

Interestingly, Charlie suggested that new students leave their ego behind, or any exaggerated sense of self-importance for that matter, as it was seen as an obstruction to their learning and could disrupt the acculturation process in the new academic and sociocultural environment. As a biologist and environmentalist, he believes that it is important to encourage Thai students to take risks by leaving their comfort zone and experimenting with new lifestyles in order to become more tolerant and mature.

I think we all should get rid of our ego. One thing that biologists believe is that diversity is good for biological systems and that should be celebrated. We should not try to be the same as other people. I want new students coming here to be open-minded and stepping away from their comfort zone in order to learn about life besides reading books. Life can be risky but it's worth experiencing. (Charlie)

Regarding assumed identity, Thai doctoral students were satisfied and comfortable with their Asian ethnicity because they could, to some extent, easily blend in with the Asian-dominant population in Sydney due to their similar physical appearance; and thus, they did not have to challenge, contest or resist interacting with others. By adopting an assumed identity, the students in this study became comfortable living and learning in this Asian multicultural society where they could not only express their own Thai identity, but could also socialize with other Asian cultures. However, to acculturate into the Sydney lifestyles and cultures slowly and flexibly, they had to adapt their ways of life and adjust their viewpoints to be more tolerant and open-minded to differences.

Imposed Identity as 'Non-Native-English' Speakers

An imposed identity is constructed when the Thai students are unable to negotiate, resist, contest, or challenge imposing linguistic ideologies of NNES international students at any point in time and space while living and learning in Sydney. Despite their competent communicative English proficiency, Thai students experienced similar linguistic challenges and communicative difficulties in their daily social interactions. They encountered English with an Australian accent and slang, as well as a variety of English accents used by locals, which they found difficult to understand.

Nevertheless, they managed to develop intercultural communicative strategies and linguistic awareness that helped them to overcome such difficulties.

At first, I wasn't familiar with their accents and vocabulary, so I misunderstood them. I still speak English with a Thai accent. Sometimes I don't understand the accents of Indian and Malaysian speakers. However, you don't need to speak English to survive here as there is Thai language in shops and restaurants. If you don't know what to order on the menu, just say the number. (Alex)

In spite of being unfamiliar with other varieties of English, Alex's exposure to various English accents such as Australian, Indian, and Malaysian raised his awareness of his Thai accented spoken English. However, he noticed that it was not necessary to be able to speak much English to survive in Sydney as he could use Thai in his daily life. He could order food in English by number and picture on the menu. Kim also experienced similar challenges with the Australian accent.

I don't understand what the locals say. The Australian accent is very hard to comprehend. Although I have to say 'pardon' many times, I can communicate with them because we use body language. Commonwealth Bank has Chinese staff whose English is also good. They will try to understand us. In Sydney, there are a lot of Asian people. They learn to adapt to Asian people by speaking slowly and clearly and using simple English. It is easy for us to understand. We don't need to adjust ourselves much. Sometimes there are Chinese clients and the staff speak Chinese with them. (Kim)

Kim adopted suitable body language to overcome communication obstacles. She noted that Australian-born Chinese, also called 'ABC', tried to accommodate and facilitate other Asians' linguistic needs by modifying their speed, pronunciation, and word choice or even code-switching to Chinese.

Bob, in contrast, enjoyed talking with speakers with different English accents because he believed that it would be useful for him in understanding academic presentations at international conferences.

I am happy to talk with people whose accents are different although I do not understand them perfectly. At least, I am exposed to these varieties. When I attend seminars or present papers at international conferences, I will be more familiar with various spoken Englishes. (Bob)

Amy, however, was more concerned with plural forms regarding the 's' and 'es' used in a formal academic writing rather than her use of English in social settings.

But in an academic context, I am aware that I have to develop my communicative English a lot because Thai people do not articulate the 's' or 'es' ending for plural nouns, and use the wrong past tense. But local people do understand me if I don't speak correctly. (Amy)

Despite the local varieties of English spoken in Sydney, Rain and Charlie came to recognize the importance of consonant sounds and stress and the fact that they could cause miscommunication if not properly pronounced. Both of them tried to find various communicative strategies such as listening to public announcements and lip reading to enhance their pronunciation.

Thai people speak English with clear pronunciation of every vowel and consonant. When I pronounced 'cappuccino' as /kæp/ /pu/ /tʃi:/ /no/, the barista didn't understand. Later I learned that I could just say 'cap' instead. (Rain)

I have a very strong Thai accent. I don't pronounce the final consonant sounds like /s/ /t/ /d/. I stress every word the same without considering major and minor stresses. For example, I pronounce 'marketing' as /ma:/ /get/ /tiŋ/. I need to listen to the news a lot so that my English accent can be acquired naturally. I also read lips to understand everything. (Charlie)

Besides pronunciation, Nathan and Bee encountered Australian slang, such as 'arvo' and 'mozzies', which mean 'afternoon' and 'mosquitoes' respectively. In addition, the acronym 'BYO' stands for 'Bring Your Own' (drinks) used in restaurants. These Australian slang and acronym were confusing for Thai students as they struggled with comprehension.

I don't have any problems, except when they use Australian slang; especially during the first few years I encountered it. For example, my friend asked me if I wanted to have coffee together in the 'arvo'. I didn't know what 'arvo' was. (Nathan)

I couldn't understand when customers said 'BYO', which stands for 'Bring Your Own' drinks. I was not familiar with this term and didn't know that customers could bring their own drinks to restaurants. Another funny Australian slang term they use is 'mozzies', which means mosquitoes. (Bee)

Peach's construction of her NNES identity was influenced by her spoken English with a Thai accent; thus, her Thai identity was explicitly addressed by another Thai male speaker who greeted her 'Sawatdee krab' in Thai meaning 'hello' in English.

As a Non-Native English speaker, I need to go through a thinking process of what and how to say it in terms of grammar, accent, and pronunciation. When I listen, I know if they are a native or non-native speaker of English. I was greeted in Thai 'Sawatdee krab' in a shop because of my accent. Although I look Asian, my way of speaking and accent can identify me as a Thai. When I speak, people will know that I am not a native speaker. However, Australian-born Chinese are considered as native English speakers. (Peach)

Peach's experience suggests that her true Thai-speaking identity could not be disguised and mistaken by other Thai speakers. Although she might share her Asian look with Australian-born Chinese, who are considered a dominant group, the way she

spoke revealed the distinct grammar, accent, and pronunciation features of her Thai mother tongue.

In this study, Thai doctoral students positioned their sociolinguistic identity as NNES according to the strong features of their spoken English including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In addition, they had to be cautious of other English accents and varieties, including Australian slang that forced some of them to develop individual strategies for effective communication. However, imposed identity became problematic as they had to overcome linguistic challenges as English was not their first language. They not only had to recognize other varieties of English, but also deal with the Australian accent and slang used in social settings.

Negotiable Identity as Thai Ethnic People

Thai doctoral students' identity negotiation takes place when they encounter 'culture shock', which leads them to feel imposed upon, devalued, or misunderstood by particular persons or groups. Thus, they challenge, contest, and resist the imposing persons or groups.

Living with Australian host families, Rain and Peach experienced culture shock with two different consequences. Rain's culture shock was positive because she had an opportunity to communicate and share her cultural background with her host family. Peach, however, was not informed about her transgression of cultural norms until she had left the house. Because of her religion and being a female, Rain was not comfortable drying her underwear in public as it was considered inappropriate for a Thai woman to do so. She hung them instead on a lower rack that usually got knocked down by the wind and her host had to pick them up every time it happened. In addition, she could not walk under the clothes line as she wore a Buddha amulet. Her host family, however, viewed Rain's 'drying dilemma' from a practical perspective and told her precisely what she should do. Rain responded by explaining her religious beliefs and the position of women in Thai society, which made her host family more aware, and thereby accepting Rain's cultural quirks.

Australian people are not like Thai people in that Thai people are more emotionally bonded. They are very direct with me and I am not used to that. As a Thai woman, I hung my underwear on a lower rack that could not be publically seen. My host family asked me why I did that. I told them that I could not walk underneath the clothes line as I wore a Buddha amulet. My host family does not mind what I do now as they are aware of my religious beliefs. They used to have students from Indonesia and Japan. I was also shocked to see her grandchild putting his feet on his grandmother's face, which is a serious taboo in Thailand. (Rain)

Rain also experienced other Thai cultural taboos regarding the inappropriate use of one's feet to touch another person's face, which is considered rude and disrespectful for Thai people. Rain's acculturation required two-way communication and tolerance for her to understand and accept different practices.

Peach, on the other hand, experienced implicit culture shock as she was not aware that wearing pajamas for dinner with her host family was not culturally appropriate.

Instead of having an open communication, her host family decided to inform her on the last day of her stay, and that disappointed her since she had obviously not intended to upset her host family during the time she was staying with them.

I wore pajamas for dinner with my host, who didn't say anything until I was about to move out from the house. She told me that it was not polite to wear pajamas to dinner. I wonder why she didn't tell me earlier. If she had told me earlier, I wouldn't have done that. (Peach)

Based on these two incidences, it is clear that being a host family for international students requires cultural sensitivity and awareness in order to avoid misunderstandings about cross-cultural taboos and inappropriateness. This type of support would help to develop and create positive and rewarding experiences for both parties instead of leaving both with negative feelings and experiences. Two-way communication seems to be an effective tool for alleviating some misunderstandings and promoting better intercultural awareness.

Occasional cultural faux-pas in everyday interactions are inevitable, but for Rain, 'culture shock' came in the form of local social values related to independence that discouraged her from offering help to others – especially the elderly and children – for fear of being seen as patronizing. She came to see herself as unkind and selfish in Australia, which she saw as contrary to normal Thai practices.

People here do not take care of one another. On the bus, no one gives up their seat for the elderly and children. In Thailand, it is normal to do that. In Australia, I have learned that I do not have to offer help unless asked; otherwise, they may think that I'm undermining their capabilities or consider them as disabled. (Rain)

Considering Sydney to be an ostensibly Asian city, Alex was shocked to see Asian people kissing in public as he thought he shared their cultural norms. He was not bothered, however, by the affection expressed in public by Europeans and Australians as that was part of Western culture.

Kissing in public was a shock for me at first. Western people kiss in public and it's considered acceptable. However, I can't accept Asian people kissing in public. (Alex)

Despite generally celebrating Sydney's cultural diversity, Nathan also experienced cultural frustration regarding Muslim women's dress code, which was so 'strange' that he purposefully started to learn more about Muslim culture for him to understand and accept such differences.

Living in Sydney with its many people from diverse backgrounds and cultures is a good thing. I have many Chinese and Saudi Arabian friends who gave me an opportunity to learn some words in their language. I also get to know their cultures and events related to their religion – like Muslim [sic!]. We need to

respect each other. There is a large Muslim population around Sydney. I felt a bit strange seeing women covered from head to toe including arms, legs, ankles, neck, and sometimes their face. I wonder how they eat or swim or deal with hot summer months. I just try to understand the history and reasons why the cultural differences exist. (Nathan)

Once culturally aware and informed, it is important for Thai students to respect other cultures in order to create a peaceful society. Bob felt strongly that respect was essentially reciprocal and required mutual understanding from both parties.

I strongly believe that people should respect one another in order to live happily. Buddhism teaches us to live a moderate life. If we respect others, others will respect us. We should not do things that are against their culture. If you invite your Chinese friends to dinner, you should not put the chopsticks in their rice bowls because it means that you are worshiping their ancestors. But some Thai restaurants here do like that. (Bob)

Bob also noticed that some Thai restaurants in Sydney did not seem to respect other cultures such as sticking chopsticks into a bowl of rice, which symbolizes the worship of the dead in Chinese culture.

Comparing cross-cultural encounters in Thailand and Australia, this study shared a balanced view regarding the pros and cons of living in Sydney. On the one hand, it broadened Thai doctoral students' worldview with respect to cultural similarities and differences. On the other hand, they had to accept and be open-minded to the views of others who were not culturally sensitized through the process of social acculturation. Their negotiated identities caused by culture shock were based on their religious beliefs, personal expectations, attitudes, practices, cultural knowledge, awareness, and intercultural communication experiences. They, however, developed cross-cultural awareness and positive attitudes towards such differences in order to acculturate and integrate themselves into a linguistically and culturally diverse society.

DISCUSSION

Drawing upon Figure 1, the findings of this study portray the outer layer (macrosystem) through the representation of Thai students' membership of Asian ethnic identity based on their physical, geographical, and ethnic similarities to other prominent Asian residents of Sydney. The inner layer (mesosystem), however, exhibits Thai students as NNES, whose English was perceived as 'non-standard' and 'illegitimate'; and, thus, they had to develop communicative strategies and become aware of socio-linguistics varieties of English and local slang used in Australia. Considered as the most important and sensitive part, the core (microsystem) represents Thai students' positioning as Thai people whose Thai cultural practices are so prominent and strong that they have to challenge, contest, resist, and question whether certain practices in Australia were culturally appropriate or acceptable for Thai people. In line with Wei and Hua (2013), tensions and conflicts between individuals' ways of being and belonging can happen in different social spaces through multilingual interactions.

In this study, although the three layers of identity options of Thai doctoral students are depicted as mutually exclusive, their boundaries are rather complex, ambiguous, overlapping, and interconnected. Individuals could simultaneously construct or negotiate these three identity options depending on the 'situated' discursive practices they encountered. For instance, living with a host family, Rain felt comfortable talking with her non-Buddhist Chinese housemate as they shared Asian ethnicity and similar NNES proficiency, even if not the same religion. Rain, however, had to negotiate her Buddhist and Thai female identities with her host family as her religion's norms prevented her from drying her underwear in public or walking underneath it. She had to employ all her available identity options with her host family, which can be considered a multilingual and multicultural interactive space where she had to cross layers back and forth or in-between. Rain's situation reflects the multiplicity, hybridity, and liquidity of identities characterized by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004).

An individual's senses of being and belonging in transnational practices are formed by integrating their actions and the kind of identities that their actions signify to demonstrate their historical and sociocultural heritage identities. These identities are enhanced by one's transnational experiences and interactions (Wei & Hua, 2013). Domestic academic staff and students may expect their Asian counterparts to be aware of linguistic and sociocultural differences of the host culture (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Thai doctoral students in this study, however, preferred to maintain their traditional sociocultural beliefs, values, and practices; and thus, following Smith and Khawaja (2011), social support from either co-nationals or fellow international students appears to serve as a significant buffer against acculturative stress or conflict, which can potentially enhance their psychological and sociocultural adaptations to improve their social inclusion and tolerance in the midst of linguistic and cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on a group of nine Thai doctoral students' social acculturation yielding insights into understanding not only their experiences of linguistic and sociocultural adjustment, but also their identity construction and negotiation in relation to their senses of being, belonging, social interactions, and community networks in multilingual settings in Australia. These multiple layers of three identity options include assumed identity as Asian people, imposed identity as NNES, and negotiable identity as Thai people. These identity options were constructed and layered from the outer and inner circles and to the core, which were based on Thai students' senses of Asian community membership, English language ownership, and Thai ethnicity, respectively. This study views these identity options as essential to formulating a better understanding of how Thai doctoral students constructed and negotiated their identities in different multilingual and multicultural settings during the course of their education at an Australian university. Different layers of identity options allow deeper insights into the complexity of the Thai students' constructed and negotiated identities that impact on various communicative practices in Australian society. Social interactions and networks outside the classroom play important roles in assisting them to overcome sociocultural and linguistic challenges and familiarize themselves with and adapt to living and learning in Australia.



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