The International Student Experience:

Studying in an English Language Institute at a Regional University in Texas

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to gain an understanding of the stressors associated with being an international student studying in an English language program at a regional university in Texas. We discovered that international students experience different stressors than their American counterparts including transportation and food concerns. Results from a focus group including international students from Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand are discussed.

*Keywords:* Multicultural counseling, international students
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During 2010-2011, the United States hosted more than 720,000 international students (Institute of International Education, 2012). International students greatly enrich the diversity of university campuses and create an opportunity for American students to interact with people from other cultures (Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper, & Feigon, 2014; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Tung, 2011). McClure (2011) concluded that international students aid in providing a global perspective to American students. McClure further stated this expanded worldview may benefit students who may want to work abroad at some point in the future as well as those who may serve people from various cultural backgrounds. Mamiseishvili (2012) noted international students provide “educational, cultural, and economic benefits” (p. 2) to American universities. The visiting students gain an American education which might open many possibilities when they return to their homeland; however, international students often experience more stressors than the average American student including issues related to acculturation and language difficulties (Carr, Koyama, & Thiagarajan, 2003; Gómez, Urzúa, & Glass, 2014; Olivas & Li, 2006; Tung, 2011; Yakunina & Weigold, 2011). Although Asian international students and other international students experience many stressors, they underuse mental health services (Yakunina and Weigold, 2011).

More research has been published on help-seeking attitudes rather than the actual help-seeking behaviors of international students. For example, Yakunina and Weigold (2011) addressed intentions to seek counseling. These authors elucidated many reasons why international students do not seek counseling as often as their American counterparts, such as being unaware of mental health services. Miville and Constantine (2007) described how perceived counseling stigma was significantly negatively related to the intentions of Asian
American university students to seek counseling. However, research on actual help-seeking behavior is limited. If attitudes and perceived counseling stigma deter international students from formal counseling, it is uncertain where, how, or even if these students find help for the stressors they endure.

Help-seeking behavior can be defined separately from basic coping behavior. A student may drink alcohol to cope with stress associated with school. However, help-seeking is perceived as being useful to health and may include counseling at a community or university clinic or could be as simple as a student calling home to talk with a parent. According to Tung, (2011) Asian students often seek help for the physical aspects of an emotional problem. For example, a stress induced headache would lead to a trip to the health center instead of a counseling session. Seeing a physician reduces stigma because, in many Asian cultures, a headache as treated by a physician is not significant, but a trip to a mental health care professional could lead to being viewed as mentally ill. Stressors international students experience may negatively impact their academic success (Newberry, Austin, Lawson, Gorsuch, & Darwin, 2011). Understanding how to better serve and retain international students is both a benefit and responsibility for American universities (Mamiseishvili, 2012).

Our study is specifically concerned with the population of international students who are in the United States to attend a university. There is limited research on this population; however more research has been conducted on the help-seeking attitudes of Asian American students. For example, Miville and Constantine (2007) explored the perceived counseling stigma associated with Asian American college women who seek counseling. These authors stated that further research is needed because their findings were not generalizable to Asian American men. Similarly, studies that address Asian Americans may not be generalizable to Asian international
students, and studies that address Asian international students may not be generalizable to international students from other countries; however, reviewing the literature concerning Asian Americans has given us insight into this phenomenon which points toward the relevance of our study. We believe the level of acculturation between citizens and non-citizens is drastically different and greatly influences both help-seeking attitudes or behavior and what these students viewed to be stressful. This is supported by Ruzek, Nguyen, and Herzog (2011) who addressed acculturation levels and psychological distress. Furthermore, many studies have only addressed attitudes or intentions rather than actual help-seeking behavior. A library search of help-seeking behavior and international students displayed only a limited number of articles.

We performed a library search for international students in conjunction with stressors, help-seeking behavior, help-seeking attitudes, and acculturation. We found general studies about behavior, but few population specific studies that addressed international students in the United States. For example, Lee et al. (2014) studied 177 Korean international students and discovered traditional cultural values influenced public stigma, self-stigma, and attitudes which ultimately impacted the willingness to seek help. Kilinc and Granello (2003) studied 120 Turkish international students and noted their participants would rather seek counseling from a friend than a therapist due to the lack of familiarity with psychological services.

The lack of available research specific to international students indicates more research is necessary to understand the experience of being an international student. This research is important to the population studied and counselor educators. The target population will benefit by counselors who gain more knowledge of these students’ stressors and help-seeking behavior; actual participants will gain a better understanding of counseling in general which may decrease counseling stigma. Counselor educators will benefit from becoming more culturally competent
and gaining the skills to better serve an underserved population. This research may elucidate reasons for student attrition. The vast majority of universities offer counseling services that aid in students' progress toward graduation. "International students are not U.S. citizens and not eligible for federal or state benefit assistant programs, such as Medicaid" (Tung, 2011, p. 384). Because international students are not eligible for these programs, it is of great importance that free or sliding-scale clinics are prepared to assist them. This research will improve these services and how they are both delivered and promoted.

Past researchers have addressed attitudes, preferences, and intentions concerning counseling as well as stressors that international populations living in the United States experience. However, there is a dearth of literature concerning specifically international students studying in American universities. The literature concerning international students' attitudes, preferences, and intentions pertaining to counseling is limited. For example, there is much more literature about Asian Americans than Asian international students or international students from other countries. We believe reviewing the existing literature on the attitudes, preferences, and intentions of Asian Americans concerning counseling will be beneficial. This review will aid in establishing background and in giving context to the phenomenon addressed herein based on the fact that the majority of international students studying in the United States are from Asia (Institute of International Education, 2012). We will later narrow our focus to only international students.

**Attitudes, Preferences, and Intentions Concerning Counseling**

Previous researchers have shown that Asian Americans are less likely than individuals from other ethnic groups to seek counseling services (David, 2010; Kim, 2007; Leong, Kim, & Gupta, 2011; Miller, Yang, Hui, Choi, & Lim, 2011; Ruzek et al., 2011). There are many
suggested reasons for this underuse of counseling services, including adherence to traditional values and unfamiliarity of what counseling truly entails.

For example, Asian Americans who are faithful to traditional cultural values have a more negative attitude toward seeking professional counseling (Ruzek et al., 2011; Suinn, 2010). Conversely, higher acculturation rates are positively correlated with help-seeking attitudes (Suinn, 2010). The more Asian Americans adhere to their traditional values, the less likely they are to seek counseling. Asian Americans who reported higher levels of acculturation also reported more positive attitudes toward seeking counseling.

Generally speaking, the counseling profession is often misunderstood due to a lack of familiarity. For example, Kilinc and Granello (2003) remarked Turkish international student who experienced counseling services were more likely to hold more favorable attitudes towards counseling. As stated before, counseling is relatively new in Asian countries, which leads a lack of familiarity with the counseling process. The recentness and unfamiliarity of counseling in many Asian countries contributes to the perceived stigma associated with counseling (Tung, 2011). China's first student counseling service was not established until 1984, according to Goh et al. (2007). Kim (2012) interviewed 12 Korean women living in the United States. One of Kim’s participants reported she did not seek help from therapists because "it was unacceptable to my family's reputation" and "I did not want to be perceived as crazy" (p. 760).

Leung and Chen (2009) pointed out that the majority of multicultural counseling research is conducted within the United States. For example, a focus group may be conducted to understand the help-seeking attitudes of Chinese American university students. However, a person who grew up in the United States versus China will have differing worldviews and much different levels of acculturation. An Asian American may have differing values and beliefs than
an Asian international student, e.g., a student who has spent 20 years in the United States may hold less traditional values than an international student who has been in the United States for one semester. Crockett and Hays (2011) suggested that understanding the worldviews of international students give voice to their stories and can lead to counseling interventions that come from the students' worldview.

**Identified Stressors**

All students must be able to communicate to participate in a university classroom. Furthermore, people must be able to communicate to accomplish daily tasks, such as shopping and paying bills. Researchers (e.g., Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Olivas & Li, 2006; Yakunina & Weigold, 2011) suggested that international students experience more stressors than the average university student including second language anxiety and loss of identity. Olivas and Li (2006) and Tung (2011) listed the lack of language proficiency as a major source of stress. Olivas and Li (2006) specifically reported that it is possible that limited language proficiency could affect both the self-concept and self-efficacy of international students studying in the United States. Kim (2012) also supported the idea of second-language anxiety. Kim interviewed a Korean woman living in the United States who reported that she was outgoing and easily made friends in Korea; however, after relocating to the United States she became shy and reserved because of how difficult it was for her to communicate in English. Second language anxiety may be so significant that it will influence future career goals. An international student may choose a career in which he or she believes being fluent in English is not required (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007).

The loss of a definite identity is another significant stressor of Asian international students (Chen & Lewis, 2011; Iwamoto & Liu, 2010; Kim, 2012). Chen and Lewis (2011)
communicated that some international students are in a state of flux; sometimes they are themselves and other times they act like Americans. They went on to elucidate the difficulty of adjusting to American cultural norms while being true to one's own culture. Furthermore, Kim (2012) expressed the difficulty of one woman who claimed to be very confused on how to interact with Asian Americans. The woman in Kim's study reported that sometimes she did not feel Korean or American. International students may see someone who appears similar to them, but is unable to communicate in their native language. Even the greeting may be confusing; does the person bow or shake hands? Iwamoto and Liu (2010) articulated that lacking a clear racial identity negatively affects self-acceptance, meaning in life, and handling daily stressors. This loss of identity may bring up an existential crisis of not belonging to a person's native culture or the new culture of the United States.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of our study was to explore the experience of being an international student studying in an English Language Institute at a regional university in Texas. We believe international students experience different stressors and seek help differently than their American counterparts. Two of the authors have been international students and have personally identified stressors particular to studying abroad.

**Theoretical Framework**

We are using Alfred Adler's individual psychology as our theoretical framework. We chose Adler because he did not view people as sick or mentally ill, but rather those struggling with life were perceived to be discouraged (Mosak & Maniacci, 2011; Watts, 2013). According to Watts, Adler viewed clients as merely "lacking the courage to engage in the tasks of living" (p. 460). Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci (2006) identified the three tasks of living as work, friendship,
and love. For an international student, the tasks of living may become daunting due to a lack of language proficiency. Adler suggested that people become discouraged because of how they perceive the world to be. Feelings of inferiority are accompanied with feelings of insignificance and disempowerment; people do not believe they are living up to their full potential (Watts, 2013). Adler's beliefs aid in the elucidation of how students may perceive themselves as being less significant in a land in which they do not adequately understand the customs or language. Feelings of inferiority may arise when international students are faced with navigating a new culture and new language; an international student with minimal English proficiency may be seen as having a wonderful grasp of the language by his or her fellow countrymen. However, after relocating to the United States, the lack of language fluency and independence concerning daily activities, such as shopping and communicating, could lead to the once gregarious and active international student becoming shy and withdrawn. A final reason for choosing individual psychology resulted from how Carlson, Engar-Carlson, and Emavardhana (2011) have applied Adlerian counseling in Thailand. These authors argued that the Adlerian approach was received well by people in Thailand, and that it was a good fit with their Buddhist culture.

**Methodology**

We used a phenomenological research design for our qualitative study and we employed a focus group in our study because it is well-suited to qualitative research and allows for a phenomenon to be explored in depth. The focus group is considered an innovative research method and has been used much by social scientists in recent years (Acocella, 2012). Focus groups also facilitate the exploration of many perspectives and the sharing of ideas between group participants (Edmondson & Irby, 2008). We felt as though the focus group would be an appropriate tool for understanding a phenomenon and giving voice to the participants. We
developed a set of questions to initiate conversation, but also allowed for the participants to add what they believed was significant.

**Context**

The city from which the participants were selected had an estimated population of 38,664 in 2011 (United States Census Bureau, 2011). This is significant because participants reported stressors related to living in a small city.

**Participants**

We used a convenience sample. The participants were selected from international students attending an English Language Institute at a regional university in Texas. All participants had been in the United States for less than one year. The international students who participated were in level four of an English program and were asked to participate based on English proficiency. The program has levels one through five with five being the highest level within the English Language Institute. We received permission from the coordinator of the program and two professors to promote our project during their classes. Students were given the opportunity to register for the study and all but one who registered participated in the research. All participants were volunteers. Seven students participated in the focus group. Three participants were from Saudi Arabia, three were from Mexico, and one was from Thailand. They were all between the ages of 19 and 28.

**Data Collection**

The focus group allowed us to gather the information we wanted, and we also gained insights for which we had not planned. We were able to identify positive and negative experiences related to being an international student studying in a relatively small Texas city. By analyzing their negative experiences, we were able to identify stressors associated with being an
international student in Texas and help-seeking behavior of the students. The focus group stimulated conversation beyond our questions, which will be discussed later in this article. The university's institutional review board approved the research. All participants signed a letter of consent to be a member of the focus group; this assured them of confidentiality and anonymity. We used a focus group that lasted one hour. The focus group was held in a university class room. The participants gave us written permission to audio record the focus group.

**Instrument**

We used a focus group in our study which implemented open-ended questions to explore the experience of the participants. We achieved saturation by analyzing the data until no new significant statements emerged (Hays & Singh, 2012). The participants were informed that all the questions were concerning their experience as an international student studying at a university in Texas. The interview questions used to spark discussion in our focus group were:

- Tell me about a good experience you have had in the United States. Why was that a good experience?
- Tell me about a not-so-good experience you have had in the United States.
- What did you do about that?
- What do you need? What would make life as an international student better in the United States?
- What did you have in your country that you do not have in the United States that would make life easier or better?
- What would you like to add?

**Validity and reliability of the instrument.** Validity is characterized by the strategies used to address threats to validity (Maxwell, 2005). We implemented strategies to address both
the threat of researcher bias and reactivity. Maxwell (2005) described bias as the subjectivity of the researcher and reactivity as how the researcher might impact the setting or participants. We controlled for bias by having all three researchers approve of the questions contained in the instrument. We were specifically concerned with two of the researchers who had been international students themselves and who might unintentionally interject their expectations or experiences into the instrument. This was controlled for by having a third researcher validate the questions on the instrument. Reactivity as described by Maxwell (2005) says that researchers are always a part of the research because they are with the participants. He went on to say that it is more beneficial to understand how we influence instead of attempting to minimize our influence. We addressed the threat of reactivity by attempting to predict and understand how the setting and researcher would influence the participants. We tried to make the setting as comfortable as possible by using a familiar classroom that the participants already used on a weekly basis. The instrument was written in an open-ended fashion in an attempt to avoid leading questions. Furthermore, the researchers discussed among themselves how to stay objective and approach the focus group to most effectively gather information and not to prove or disprove hypotheses.

We did not attempt to say that this instrument is reliable, only that the identified themes were reliable. Lunenburg and Irby (2008) argued that it is not the instrument that is reliable, but the scores that are reliable. Interrater reliability is the degree to which more than one person records similar scores based on observations (Creswell, 2012). We accounted for interrater reliability by having two of the researchers read the transcription and identify themes from the focus group. The themes were compared afterwards and all researchers verbally agreed on the major themes identified which led us to believe the identified themes are reliable.
Validity and reliability of the study. In order to provide credibility and build trustworthiness, we employed triangulation. We triangulated our findings with participant feedback, the data, among all researchers, and with the literature. We first summarized answers after each question was asked and checked with the participants throughout the focus group to foster a better understanding of the responses and the lived experiences of the participants. After each question was answered by all participants, we summarized what had been said by identifying themes and allowed the participants to agree or disagree with the summarization. All participants verbally agreed and validated the themes throughout the focus group. Secondly, we reviewed the transcription data and compared it to the identified themes. Thirdly, we used investigator triangulation which involves the use of multiple researchers (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). We achieved investigator triangulation by all three of the researchers reaching an agreement on the identified themes. Finally, we checked our results against our literature review.

Researchers' Perspective

Because two of the three researchers have been international students, we paid close attention to any biases we might have and employed what Maxwell (2005) called reactivity and what Creswell (2012) described as reflexivity in an attempt to control for researcher biases. Creswell (2012) stated that reflexivity is the researchers' ability to be open and aware of their role and influence on the research site and participants. We agreed that struggling with a new language was the biggest challenge we experienced while studying abroad. We assumed it would be the same for our participants.

Data Analysis

We transcribed the entire focus group interview verbatim. From the transcript, we identified themes from the focus group and ranked them as being most common to least
common. The participants were also allowed to explore issues related to their experiences as international students in Texas which were beyond our questions. Afterward, we discussed the participants' identified themes, stressors, and help-seeking behavior.

Results

Positive Experiences

Nearly all responses to "Tell me about a good experience" involved social aspects of the international students' experiences. Meeting new people and compatriots assisting with the transition to American life were on the top of the list of positive experiences. One participant from Saudi Arabia reported that his fellow countrymen were very helpful in answering questions and giving him a ride when necessary. Another participant from Mexico stated that meeting new people and always having something to do such as social events was a positive experience. One participant listed the university football games as "amazing." He went on to discuss the elaborate show, food, and all that is associated with a football game at an American university. The participant from Thailand said that one positive experience was being able to study in a foreign country. Apartment complexes offering monthly contracts was listed a positive experience; this will be discussed in greater detail under the negative experiences section.

Negative Experiences

After asking the participants to tell us about a "not-so-good experience," we identified three major themes: (a) dissatisfaction with public transportation, (b) inadequate access to traditional foods, and (c) concerns over living situations. First of all, every participant agreed that public transportation was not adequate in the small city where they were living. An international student from Saudi Arabia reported that he would have to pay up to 170 dollars for a trip to the airport. This same participant stated he was only able to go shopping approximately once per
The student from Thailand declared, "I can't go anywhere." The students asserted there is only one taxi in the city where they live and that the buses to the bigger cities do not run often enough. Only one student had a car and he stated that, "I do not suggest international students come to a small town to study, because they will spend a lot of money on transportation."

The second major theme that all participants agreed on was inadequate access to traditional foods. Food was a major issue in the discussion group. The importance of having traditional foods was summed up best by a Mexican participant who explained, "Happy stomach, happy heart." The students reported they could not find food from their homeland in the small town. Furthermore, those who knew how to cook their native foods indicated they could not find the ingredients they needed to properly cook the food they wanted. Furthermore, the participants from Saudi Arabia noted that food, specifically meat from the local stores, was unlikely to be prepared in a manner which was compatible with their religion (they were referring to Halal food). The students reported they would have to travel to a major city to get the ingredients they needed, but the lack of public transportation made traveling difficult.

The last common theme identified was related to living situations such as apartments and dorms. Although the complaints differed, all participants listed living or housing situations as a negative experience. The university assigns roommates in the dorms and in campus apartments; we discovered this to be a stressor for both American and international students. Two of the students reported that people did not get along in dorms. One participant stated that he wished the dorms would be remodeled so that there was one student per unit. A female student from Saudi Arabia indicated that, "For girls like me, it's impossible to have a roommate. It's really hard." The students asserted that moving to a city and signing a six month to one year lease at an
apartment complex was distressing because often they did not know how long they would be living in that particular town or city.

How negative experiences were handled. The participants discussed how they overcame the issue of public transportation. The most common response was to get a ride from a friend. One student simply stated he walks everywhere. Another reported he bought a bicycle. What appeared to be the least enjoyable remedy to the issue of transportation was the public transportation itself. The students reported that sometimes they had to use a taxi because they had no other option. "I wait an hour on the taxi because I have no choice." One participant asserted that because of limited public transportation, he only went shopping once a month.

Secondly, the international students discussed how they addressed issues related to food. The most common solution to finding food or ingredients was to go to a bigger city. Two of the students reported that they had to read ingredients carefully to make sure the food was compatible with their religion. Finally the issue of housing was addressed. The topic that the students had the most questions about was sparked by another student. The students were discussing how distressful it was for them to commit to a six month or yearly apartment contract when one participant stated she found an apartment with a monthly lease. All students asked her about where she lived and how much the rent was per month. The participants were pleased to hear about monthly leases. The problems of living in a dorm were ameliorated by moving to an apartment.

What Could Make Life Better as an International Student

The students reported a number of things they would like to have. Everyone agreed that having an advisor to help with immigration, cultural and local customs, and legal questions would be very beneficial. The participants asserted that immigration is a serious issue for all
international students. One student reported that he had to go to court for a traffic ticket. He further stated that this worried him very much because people did not go to court in his country unless it was very serious. Another example concerned downloading music and movies. The students were confused because they had read that it is illegal to download music and movies without paying, but they did so in their countries and they heard Americans download music and movies here, too. This concern over downloading music and movies was an excellent example of how confusing laws and societal norms can truly be. A participant reported that if he had just known what the law specifically said, then it would be his responsibility to make his own decisions. All agreed that more adequate public transportation would improve their experience as international students. The international students also reported they would like more chances to speak with American students and practice their English. They reported having an activity referred to as free talk, but that it came at the end of the day when they were tired from classes. One student stated that she would like to have a library dedicated to English language learners. She stated, "I have big problems in some standardized tests, such as TOEFL and GRE. We are really lost, and we need extra resources." Most of the participants asserted that they wanted more than eight students in a classroom. The reason they gave for this is if they are in a classroom that only has students who speak the same language, they are going to speak their native language and not practice English. A student from Saudi Arabia declared that he moved from Houston because there were so many Saudi students in the program that he never spoke English. He further discussed how there are more opportunities to speak English in a smaller city.

**Additional Information**

The students were asked what they would like to add to the overall discussion. They asserted they wanted to point out the positives of being international students studying in their
English Language Institute. They all reported having good teachers and a good program. They also indicated that the American students were often friendly and they "try to make friendships with us." The participants also said they understand the university has many programs and centers dedicated to helping students, but that nobody tells them what is available. The majority also stated they would like to meet once a week to discuss what is going on with each other. A final remark was to emphasize the importance of having an advisor for general, non-academic questions.

**Discussion**

We learned the majority of stressors such as public transportation and food issues were related to living in a small city. Our study is unique because we found no other study related to international students and stressors associated with public transportation or lack of traditional foods. The researcher who lived in Thailand for two years could attest to this as well. He reported having to travel to Bangkok to shop in a market that sold Western food. He also stated that he became accustomed to Thai food, but when he missed home or experienced stress, he wanted American comfort food such as a hamburger or pizza. However, those foods were never the same as they were in his homeland. This was echoed by the participant from Mexico who said the Mexican food near the university is not authentic. The researchers also wanted to express the international students were very thankful for the opportunity to discuss their experiences, and they were quick to find similarities between themselves and the researchers.

**Implications**

We suggest paying attention to the unique challenges that international students experience from an emic perspective. All of the international students who participated in our study identified stressors that the average American student does not experience such as distress
involving the lack of adequate public transportation and issues associated with not having their traditional foods available. When searching for an English program, international students might benefit from considering how their prospective university can ameliorate these concerns associated with being international students. This is supported by Mamiseishvili (2012) who asserted American universities must assume some of the responsibility for retaining international students. Furthermore, a university might benefit by promoting an English language program that addresses the concerns of international students. Our results refuted our assumption that language would be the most challenging aspect of being an international student studying in the United States. Learning more about the needs of our international student population is how we learn to better serve them. This is supported by Kilinc and Granello (2003) who asserted college counselors should interact more with international students to become more familiar with their culture and needs. We suggest counseling professionals and university personnel become more involved with international students in order to better understand their unique needs.

**Limitations**

Selecting students based on English proficiency could have skewed the results because one of our beliefs is that second language anxiety is a major stressor for international students. The more fluent the students are in English, the less anxiety they typically report. It could be surmised that participants from lower levels might have reported more anxiety associated with speaking English.
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