

# Exploring Multilingual International Students' Identity-related Experiences through Pictures

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## Abstract

This paper shares findings from an investigation connected to a larger research study which sought to holistically understand multilingual international students' socio-academic and linguistic experiences at a university in Ontario. In here, the focus is placed on the students' identity-related experiences in light of post-structuralist theory in applied linguistics. By drawing on interviews and participant-generated photography, this study seeks to link theory and experience, and to illustrate some of the complexity, diversity, and subjectivity of identity and identity-related experiences for multilingual international students for whom English is an additional language.

## Background

Canadian universities and colleges have experienced a rapid increase in the number of international students over the last decade. International students contribute to the diversification of their host academic communities in multifaceted ways. They are known particularly for their important role in increasing the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, intellectual, and financial profile of their institutions. Additionally, within the classroom, international students can contribute to enhancing cross-cultural teaching and learning by offering international and inter-cultural perspectives, especially around themes of diversity and global issues (Andrade, 2006). Intense efforts to internationalise higher education and to recruit more international students have also broadened the global range of both sending and hosting nations—this is one of the very complex reasons behind Canada's emergence as a popular choice for international students (Choudaha, 2017).



However, despite the overall increased diversity, international students continue to be discussed primarily as a monolithic group. This has been especially true for multilingual international students who speak English as an additional language, who comprise the vast majority of international students worldwide today (Tan, 2015) and are commonly categorised as English as a second language (ESL) students. While on one hand, the categorisations of “international student” and “ESL” hold practical value for academic institutions; on the other, they can be reductionist for multilingual international students. In recognition of the existing heterogeneity within this group, this study is concerned with exploring the lived experiences of multilingual international students beyond these institutional categories. This study is guided by the following question: What can an emic approach tell us about the students’ identity-related experiences as and beyond multilingual international students at a university in Canada?

## Re-thinking Identity

Post-structuralist theory proposes that identity is experienced dynamically; comprised of multiple intersecting positions; and constructed socially, collaboratively, and discursively (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002). This theoretical perspective challenges “traditional” notions of identity as “fixed” and “binary” in applied linguistics (e.g. native/non-native speaker). However, as Duff (2012) has explained, much of the early L2 research focused on the identities of multilingual speakers was largely informed by sociolinguistic perspectives on identity, generally in which first language and ethnic background were the common identity denominators for the multilingual individual. Consequently, while much progress has been made in applied linguistics with respect to identity, it is not unusual that in many contexts, identity is still discussed under the effects of a strong sociolinguistic approach.

These early perspectives led to what some have critiqued as an essentialist approach to discussing identity (Duff, 2012). This generally means that some believe parts of our identities are not only inalterable, but also ontologically necessary. Though this may be certainly true in some dimensions of experience, in the contexts of ESL and English as an additional language (EAL), this type of essentialism has become increasingly detrimental for multilingual learners. For instance, in a study exploring multilingual students’ experiences transitioning from high school into university in Canada, Marshall (2009) illustrated how the students had been assigned an “ESL student” identity by their academic institution because of their English-language status. Yet, the students’ expectation was that the transition into university would afford them a chance to break from this label, which they had experienced as a kind of intellectual deficit among their Canadian peers in their Canadian high school.

Findings from other studies have also reported similar concerns. Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) examined the identity-related experiences of multilingual immigrant students in a composition class and demonstrated



how the students employed effortful and continuous negotiation in order to deflect their imposed association to being (seen as) ESL learners. For them, this identity label evoked feelings of deficiency and otherness in their immediate communities. Additionally, Tavares (2019) found that in the context of peer interaction in the academic classroom, multilingual international students may often refuse participation when their oral language proficiencies in English as an additional language are considered a sign of intellectual inferiority by their host peers. Altogether, these findings highlight some of the harmful limitations imposed identities can have for multilingual, additional language learners.

## Method

This study was based on interviews and photographs taken by three multilingual international students. In the winter term of 2019, four semi-structured interviews, of approximately one hour each for a total of 12 hours, were conducted to explore and understand the students' experiences on and off campus, with a focus on their multiple positions, roles, and skills, and the ways in which these intersected with their institutional roles of (multilingual) international students at Tree University, a pseudonym for a large research-oriented university in Ontario. Tree University comprised the research site for this study for its rich multicultural and multilingual profile, and large campus population.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed for emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). Photographs taken by the students were shared with the aim of visually capturing, from the students' perspectives, experiences which they considered uniquely representative of their identities (Allen, 2012). For ethical reasons, students were instructed to only provide photographs in which they were not present. Photographs were analysed through a visual semiotic approach (van Leeuwen, 2004). Although on average 20 photographs were provided by each student, for the purpose of this paper only one photograph is included.

The participants were:

- Gabriela, multilingual international graduate student from Brazil.
- Wong, multilingual international undergraduate student from Macau.
- Sara, multilingual (former international) graduate student from Iran.

## Findings

### Gabriela

Gabriela was a multilingual international student with extensive professional experience prior to coming to Canada. In Brazil, she had worked as a journalist for a major national news broadcasting company after

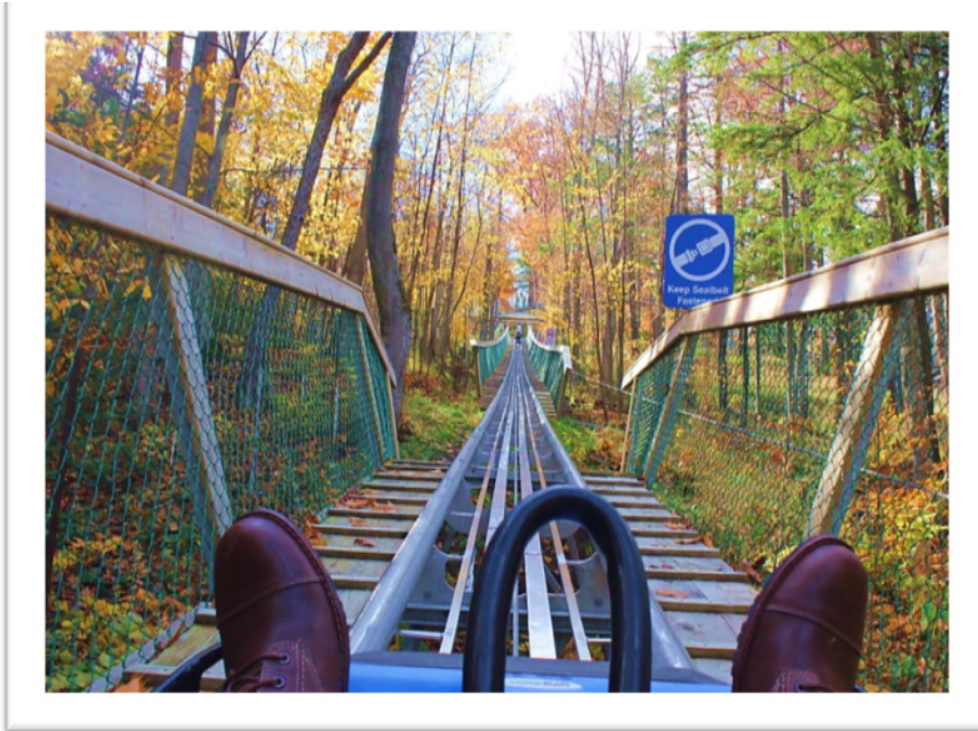


graduating from an undergraduate program in journalism. In addition to her professional experience, Gabriela had studied French for several years, and once she had completed a multi-level French language program in Rio, she moved on to taking Italian language courses as well—all this alongside Portuguese, the language she grew up speaking, and also English, which she had studied for a few years specifically for the purpose of passing the foreign language component of her university entrance exam. Once in Toronto, however, she experienced challenges in enacting the identities she had been constructing for herself over time because of insufficient oral proficiency in English when in interaction with others.

Before starting her graduate studies at Tree University, Gabriela was a student in a private ESL school in Toronto. Although this was an important experience for the development of her linguistic skills, she felt as if the ESL student (identity) “label,” channelled and maintained through her affiliation to the language school, signalled out certain language-learner stereotypes when in first-time interactions with local Torontonians which she did not consider only inaccurate for herself, but also overshadowing of other facets of her multilingual, transnational, academic, and professional identities. She was especially disheartened when her interlocutors considered her fragile, lost, or in need of help to navigate the city or understand written communication. After a few months in the ESL program, Gabriela opted to resign from the language school in an act of identity—she wished to break ties with anything that would continuously position her as an “ESL learner” before Canadians.

At Tree University, Gabriela needed to align her identity to that of a university student once more, but this time, in Canada. Initially, she had underestimated the influence of the culturally-informed dimension behind being a student in another country: “I realised that the ‘number-one student of the class’ I had always been in Brazil was just not something I could naturally transfer to being a student here in Canada, and that was because of both culture and language,” she reported in one of our interviews. Together with an in-progress development of her proficiency in academic language, the cultural re-alignment in being a student in the Canadian context—as in when to ask questions, to challenge her instructors, and to deliver presentations, to cite a few context-specific interactions—led Gabriela to feel like she was on a “roller-coaster” (figure 1). She felt as though she had much to learn, but all that at such a fast pace. Because Gabriela loved new challenges, she fully embraced this experience and enjoyed every lesson along the way.





*Figure 1: Gabriela's new student journey.*

## Wong

Wong was a multilingual international student from Macau, China, who experienced cultural shock as he transferred from a university in all-year-round sunny Santa Monica, California, to Tree University in Ontario. In his experience, the long and cold Canadian winter, along with the “socially conservative” culture of Ontario, interfered with the full enactment of the outgoing, social, and inquisitive personality traits of his identity. He experienced Canadian students as socially distant and uninterested in developing meaningful friendships with international students. On the other hand, in Santa Monica, his experience was the opposite: people seemed more open, friendly, and risk-taking in terms of cultivating cross-cultural friendships. As a consequence, because Wong’s identity was most often enacted collaboratively through socialisation with others, the inability to enact—and in so doing, to live like—his “true self” like he did successfully in California (figure 2), contributed to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with his academic experience and with his overall time living in Ontario.

Wong spoke Mandarin and Japanese, in addition to English. While going to Tree University full-time for a degree in Linguistics, he worked part-time at a Japanese restaurant, which he enjoyed because it fuelled his interest for Japanese culture. In relation to his cultural identity, Wong preferred to see himself as “half Western-half Eastern” as he considered his long nine years in the United States—first in New York, and then in Santa Monica—to have significantly impacted his ways of seeing himself, others, and the world.

From living in the United States for an extensive amount of time, Wong embraced new cultural perspectives that he believed aligned more authentically with his view of himself. However, his new cultural orientations posed ongoing identity conflict for him when he interacted with members of the Chinese community at Tree University. He could not see himself as a full member of that community—“I’ve just changed too much,” he explained. Accordingly, he sought ways to differentiate himself from his co-nationals while attending Tree University, often by strategising what language to speak and when.



Figure 2: Wong’s vivid memory of California: “I just feel like I belong in Cali.”

## Sara

Sara taught herself English as an adult while she lived in Iran. The development of her English language skills was mediated by the frequent opportunities to speak English she encountered during her time working in the tourism industry in Iran and by her undergraduate studies in English at a local university. As a result, when Sara moved to Canada, she felt comfortable to interact conversationally and informally with Canadians. With plans to become an ESL teacher in Ontario, her new home, she completed a CELTA certificate and subsequently found a job as a teacher at an ESL language school. Her professional identity continued to expand as she began networking and refining her teaching skills through professional development. At the personal level, Sara was fascinated by the linguistic diversity of Canada, and enrolled in a beginner’s French

language course to enhance her multilingual and multicultural proficiency. The new sociocultural context of Ontario afforded her numerous chances to explore and experiment with her identity.

As a multilingual international student in a graduate program at Tree University, Sara encountered challenges with the academic register of English, particularly around academic reading and writing. The articles she was expected to read for her classes normally employed a complex level of language which she was linguistically unprepared for. Inevitably, she spent much more of her time reading to understand than she had anticipated. Sara also drew on the skills and knowledge from her position as an ESL teacher in order to cope with and overcome some of her academic language challenges. She taught herself the very learning strategies she taught her multilingual students at the ESL school. Furthermore, she adopted some of the study habits of her host peers to help her progress and later succeed in her studies. The graduate student experience led her to eventually become a permanent resident, a new identity position which she welcomed with open arms. Sara considered herself “semi-Canadian” (figure 3) and maintained a dual cultural identity by embracing both Canadian and Iranian cultural traditions which she believed reflected her personal view of the world.



Figure 3: “I like the snow, but only for one month!”—being “semi-Canadian.”

## Conclusion

From a post-structuralist perspective, students’ accounts of their experiences as multilingual international students help challenge essentialist views of identity as fixed, simplistic, and singular. As the students’

experiences demonstrate, identity should be seen as a nexus of multiple subjective roles, positions, and knowledge(s) (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), along with a combination of students' individual traits, interests, goals, and abilities. Oftentimes, however, these unique facets may be overlooked by the identity "labels" assigned to multilingual language learners. When approached from the (emic) perspective of lived experience, the findings suggest that identity construction and enactment can also be experienced as sites of struggle and negotiation. As multilingual international students navigate different sociocultural spaces, including those of their host universities, they may encounter challenges in presenting their true selves once the identity positions made available to them by their host communities (e.g. native/non-native, international/domestic, immigrant, ESL) are incongruent with those developed through and throughout the complex trajectories of their individual identity journeys across time and space. Challenges related to identity enactment may also be exacerbated by linguistic, psychological, and cultural difference.

As additional and second language instructors and researchers, creating space and opportunity for multilingual learners to construct and enact their identities remains one of our top priorities. In this study, multilingual international students were invited to draw on photography in order to capture and share singular moments as well as feelings which they believed were representative of their overall identity experience. By taking and sharing their own pictures, participants may also act as co-researchers (Allen, 2012). When understood in juxtaposition with the interview data, the students' pictures can help produce a unique representation of their individual experiences.

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