The incidence of study-related stress in international students in the initial stage of the international sojourn

By Lorraine Brown

Abstract

This paper explores the incidence of stress in international students in relation to the requirements of an international Masters Programme. The data presented here were taken from a doctoral ethnographic study of the adaptation of international postgraduate students to life in the UK, involving individual interviews with thirteen students over the academic year 2003/4 as well as participant observation of the entire cohort of 150 Masters students. It is suggested that article stress related to the academic task

is caused by academic cultural differences particularly in regard to critical evaluation and participation in discussion in class, and by language ability. This study shows that stress is intense at the beginning of the academic programme and declines gradually as a function of a reduction in the academic workload, rather than as a function of time.

Author profile

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1. Introduction

It is widely agreed that at the start of their stay, most sojourners[1] will experience some degree of culture shock (e.g. Kim 1988; Gudykunst 1998; Hofstede 2001). Culture shock is defined as anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, which we do not carry on the level of conscious awareness (Oberg 1958), and their substitution by other cues that are strange (Hall 1959). Among the many symptoms of culture shock are physical illness, low self-esteem, low morale, social isolation, dissatisfaction with life, bitterness, homesickness, disorientation, anxiety, depression, role strain, identity confusion, stress, loneliness, self-doubt, hostility, distress, personality disintegration helplessness, irritability, fear, and self-deprecation (e.g. Adler 1975; Alexander et al. 1976; David 1976; Detweiler, 1980; Jacobson-Widding, 1983; Furnham and Alibhai, 1985; Adelegan and Parks 1985; Kim 1988; Storti 1990; Hofstede 1991; Persaud 1993; Berry 1994, Gudykunst 1988; and many more). Sources of strain include racial discrimination, weather and food differences, language, accommodation, separation from home, dietary restrictions, money, diminished social interaction, role and status change and a different educational system (ibid). The severity and duration of the experience of culture shock are a function of cultural and individual differences (Kim 1988; Searle and Ward, 1990; Furnham 1993; Ward and Chang 1997; Ward et al 2001). Given that the purpose of visit of international students[2] in Higher Education is to achieve an educational qualification, and that they have to become academically competent soon after arrival in the new country, the negative symptoms associated with culture shock are often very intense.

In an ethnographic study of the adaptation experience of a sample of postgraduate international students in the UK, culture shock was suffered by nearly all students, with one of the most commonly cited symptoms being stress related to the demands of their intensive Masters course. Stress is considered to be a generalised physiological and psychological state brought about by the experience of stressors in the environment, identified as having their source in the process of acculturation (Zajonc 1952; Hamburg et al. 1974; Detweiler 1980; Berry 1994). In this study, the environmental stressors included the academic requirements of the postgraduate course of study, the need for a good level of English language and the dissonance between the academic conventions of the students' origin country and those of the UK. According to Ballard and Clanchy (1997), students enter Higher Education with expectations shaped by their previous learning experience, which is often significantly different from the education system in the new country. Thus academic difficulties may arise not just because of

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[1] The term sojourn is used by Ward et al. (2001) to refer to temporary between-society culture contact.
[2] Defined as any non-UK resident (Pelletier 2004).

linguistic differences but also due to a failure to understand or communicate at a cultural level, something which may not have been anticipated. Academic success is dependent on the assimilation of the norms of the academic culture (Blue 1993), and it is for this reason that the culture of the academic world is usually more important for international students than that of the host community (Sharples 1995), as failing to gain a qualification will result in loss of face on the part of the student and their family (Barker 1997; Hofstede 2001; Ryan and Carroll 2005). Accordingly, international students often reduce their cultural adaptation to the minimum required to fulfil their role as student (Gudykunst 1983; Kim, 1988).

There is a temporal relationship between culture shock and adjustment (Searle and Ward, 1990; Furnham 1993; Gudykunst 1998). Culture shock is intense upon arrival in a new country, but is noted for its transitory nature, and in the models of adjustment, it is the first stage of adaptation that sojourners go through (e.g. the U-Curve model by Lysgaard 1955; the W-Curve model by Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963). It might be expected therefore that stress would be most prominent in the initial stage of the academic sojourn and would diminish once adjustment to academic norms and conventions had been made, and once students had developed sufficient linguistic competence to meet the demands of the course. This paper will discuss the incidence of stress among international postgraduate students in the initial stage of their sojourn, and will discuss the causes and duration of this stress as well as its impact on students' quality of life.

2. Methodology

The doctoral research (as yet unpublished) from which the data for this paper were taken involved an ethnographic investigation into the adaptation experience of international students at a university in the South of England, using participant observation, and in-depth interviews. Ethnography, an interdisciplinary research approach often used in education (Hammersley 1992), was adopted for this study as the aim of the research was to study international students in a natural setting and to obtain the emic or insider perspective on academic life (Fetterman 1998). The setting chosen for this research was the Graduate School at a university in the south of England. As I work there as a lecturer in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), I am already 'in the field'; I have direct access to students and ample opportunity for observation in an overt participant role. Ethnographers mostly use purposive sampling, selecting a specific location and students (Daymon and Holloway 2002). The inclusion criteria for selecting interviewees were that students should be Masters students on the same course and that they should vary in nationality. Many students volunteered for the project, so I was fortunate that interviewees were fairly representative of the population of 150 students with regard to nationality[3], gender, age, living situation, religion and culture. Thirteen students were interviewed over a 12 month academic year (involving four formal tape-recorded interviews and many informal conversations).

[3] The breakdown of the interviewees' nationality is as follows: Thai, Indonesian, Chinese, Taiwanese, Brazilian, South African, Malaysian, Slovenian, Russian, Jordanian, Iranian, Korean, and German.

Ball (1983) states that many studies do not take into account the implications of timing, which is crucial to education because of the importance of the cycles of academic activity. Institutions have their own temporal phenomenology; therefore the decision to study an institution at a particular time can be as significant as the choice of the institution itself. I started the collection of the primary data immediately as the first academic semester started in 2003, being aware that students would have particularly intense emotional experiences at the start of term when they would be attempting to adapt not only to a new sociocultural environment but also to a probably unfamiliar academic situation. Subsequent interviews were held at three monthly intervals, in an attempt to capture the process of adaptation, from the students' viewpoint, as it happened, instead of retrospectively, which does not usually permit a reliable account (Church 1982; Pelletier 2004). The second round of interviews was conducted just after the Christmas holiday. I conducted the third round of interviews shortly after the Easter holiday, towards the end of the taught part of the course (six-months). I ended the ethnographic data collection at the end of the academic year, in September 2004, upon student dissertation submission, which meant that I captured the total academic experience for a Masters student. Had I finished the data collection any earlier, I would not have captured the students' experience of isolation during the dissertation period, or the mixture of feelings arising from returning to their home country or their reflections on their year abroad.

 In addition to interviewing, participant observation was conducted throughout the year, so that the experience of the whole cohort was taken into account, as an attempt at validity through the triangulation of methods. The observation period for this research started on the first day of induction in September 2003 and finished two weeks after dissertation submission. Examples of observation sites and occasions include: the classroom, the corridor, the library, the coffee bar, the canteen, the office, induction, social events organised by the School or University and by students themselves. Observations and opportunistic conversations were recorded in a field journal on a daily basis. These field notes proved to be a rich source of data, with topics arising in class, in tutorials etc, which also arose during the interviews, e.g. food, the weather, religion, drinking, academic difficulties.

According to Mason (2002), qualitative research raises a number of ethical issues which should be anticipated in advance. Ethical approval to undertake this study was sought from the university Research Ethics Committee, and access to students was formally granted by the main gatekeeper, in this case, the Head of School. During induction week (in September), when I met the entire student group in my capacity as EAP lecturer, I introduced my research topic verbally and in writing, and asked for informed consent to observe and record observations on a daily basis. I also asked for volunteers for the interviewing aspect of the research. As students volunteered, an information sheet was issued and students were reminded of confidentiality issues, their right to withdraw from the study, and the anonymity of data.

In ethnography, the analysis of data is not a distinct stage of research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995): it is necessary from the start to direct the next interview and observation. After the first interviews had been conducted in the first weeks of term (October 2003) and observation had begun, preliminary analysis, involving coding field and interview data, was carried out. According to Glaser (1978), the analytic code is essential, as it conceptualises underlying patterns of empirical indicators, and stops the researcher from getting lost in the data (Mason 2002). Coding meant reading through notes and repeatedly listening to tapes and reading transcripts until themes or categories (an example of which is language anxiety) began to emerge, as certain phrases events, activities, ideas etc occurred repeatedly in the text. I undertook four rounds of 13 interviews, and after each round, the transcript was scrutinised, and recurring and key topics were highlighted to be followed up in the next interview. Once the interview transcripts were analysed, I searched through the field notes and email correspondence for anything the student had said during class etc, to feed into the subsequent interview. To facilitate the process, I created a codebook, with a list of codes after analysing the first round of interviews, which I updated as the data collection proceeded.

As in much qualitative research, an inductive approach was adopted. Once analysis started to clarify the emerging topics, literature was collected, but not read, so as to avoid influencing subsequent interviews. After the final round of interviews, literature was reviewed, and relationships were established between the primary and secondary data. Primary and secondary data will be interwoven in this paper, so that discussion takes place as the data are presented. Finally, to be faithful to the ethnographer's desire to capture the emic view of the social world, much use will be made of verbatim quotations from students.

3. The relationship between stress and the academic task

The source of stress for students in this ethnographic study was the one-year masters programme. As will be seen, stress was caused by the demanding nature of the programme, the need for a high level of English language and the dissonance between the host and original country academic culture. As noted by Persaud (1993), *all* students are challenged by the demands of Higher Education, but many international students are particularly placed under pressure by the confrontation with an alien academic culture and the need to become linguistically competent quite quickly. When confronting a new environment necessitating the learning of new behaviour, stress is a common reaction, which can become chronic, until adjustment is reached (Kim 1988; Berry 1994). Indeed, in this study, the pressure experienced by students was often manifested in weight loss, insomnia, agitation and tearfulness, with a consequent reduction in well-being both physically and mentally.

3.1 Intensity of the course

In the first weeks of their intensive postgraduate course, when the workload was typically high, and students had to adjust to a new academic culture and a foreign language environment, the anxiety experienced by students was intense. Words used repeatedly by interviewees to describe their feelings included: *worried, nervous, scared, afraid, tough, pressured, tiring, hard and demanding.* In particular, students were overwhelmed by the requirement to write eight assignments inside 12 weeks in a foreign language, as expressed below:

We have to work so hard. I cannot sleep! All the assignments come at the same time.   Jordanian interviewee

Sometimes I cannot sleep and when I want to sleep I get up so early, I don't know why. 'I want to sleep, don't wake up!' I don't get up, I just try to lie on my bed, one hour later, I give up, I get up. Maybe it's because the deadline of assignment was coming. I try to do, lots of stuff. Too much work!   Thai interviewee

Conversations with the rest of the student group (in class, in tutorials, in the corridor) revealed that the majority of the cohort were suffering stress, as evidenced in the huge number of emails received related to the difficulty of assignments and of meeting deadlines, an example of which is below:

I have to face with of a lot of assignments in this term. I am trying my best for studying. Unfortunately, at the moment, I have stress at all. I am so stress now. I can not concentrate in the first assignment. Meanwhile, the deadline of this assignment will be coming on Monday next week. I worry so much about that. I need the help from you because nobody can help me.   October 10

Inside the first few weeks of term, many students came to see my office in tears, many wailed in despair when discussing assignment titles in class, some holding their head in their hands at times, and on most faces there were frowns and looks of seriousness and worry. The following cry was a constant refrain: '*I am so scared!*', and there was a constant stream of emails from nearly all students, as well as queues at my office door, with questions on assignments. A typical diary entry is below:

Taiwanese student very nervous about ability to reach performance level expected on Masters course - 'I'm very scared, very scared' - and begged for my assurance that I would help him through the first few months of the course. Repeatedly thanked me for just 5 minutes of my time. Bumped into a Korean student in the corridor who talked to me anxiously about her English ability. Two more Koreans saw us, and rushed over, again anxious, worried, frowning faces, talking about level of English and ability to pass the assignments. All three students nervous, bodies hunched over, wailing every now and then. Very nervous but also very grateful to get tiniest piece of advice from me. Find I behave reassuringly to them in the same way I would my kids.   October 12

It is important here to observe that home (i.e. British) students[4] on the course faced and were stressed by the same assignment pressure: some expressed relief that they were writing essays in their own language, and showed sympathy with the additional stress of being a non-native speaker. Whilst academic dissonance and language difficulties intensified the pressure on students in this research, the intensity of the taught element of the Masters course in terms of the assignment schedule was a major stressor for all students, not specifically for international students.

The importance attached to academic success was reflected in student reactions to passing assignments: relief was manifested in delighted smiles and in one extreme case, a student fell to the floor on learning that she had achieved a Merit. Conversely, students who failed assignments came to my office, often in tears and suffering embarrassment over their perceived loss of face, frequently needing extensive counselling and reassurances over their ability to progress. As Barker (1997) notes, in international students there is a common willingness to put in long hours of study but there is also a great fear of failure.

A high level of stress was revealed in the prevalence of sickness in students and the submission of sick notes to support a request for assignment extensions. An extreme reaction was withdrawal from the course, usually following a period of sickness (three out of 150 students deferred their place on the course for a year). An example is the case of a Chinese student, who came to see me in the second week of term to say that she could not cope with the assignment schedule, she couldn't sleep or eat, she was constantly breaking down in tears (as she did in the tutorial), and that her parents were so worried about her that they were going to send out her brother to look after her. She said that when she did manage to sleep, she had bad dreams, and always woke early; she had been to the doctors to get a prescription of sleeping pills. She described herself as being in a state of nervous exhaustion, confirmed in her pale and blotchy appearance and her lethargic manner. Despite being offered an extension on assignments, the only thing that offered her relief was the opportunity to defer her studies for a year. The experience of this student is not exceptional, as this scene was recreated many times in my office, although it was only in a minority of cases that deferral was sought.

As Storti (1990) notes, stress impacts negatively on the ability to study; many students found themselves in a vicious circle of not being able to concentrate because of anxiety, which in turn fuels their level of panic, as testified to by a Korean student who said she could not read for how stressed she felt. This level of distress in the cohort necessitated on my part (as will be recognised by any study support lecturer) repeated reassurances and explanations of assignments, pointing to the demanding nature of dealing with international students for academic staff. Indeed, Channell (1990, p.73) advises those working with international students to "set boundaries on what you can and will do for them. Demands and expectations otherwise become limitless." An example of the conflict between student needs and my time and willingness to meet them is offered below:

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[4] Defined as those students who decide to remain in the country where their secondary and further education took place (Ryan and Carroll 2005)

J. came to see me to talk about the assignment, asked me a few times to check his grammar even though I'd stressed that I wouldn't.. Told me that she feel she needs to see a doctor as she is getting so stressed about the workload. Had to reassure her about her level of English as well as the work she'd done. Told her she can see me for advice, and when she left she was so reassured and relieved that she kissed me. K. came to show me work I'd already seen. She was understanding but dismissive of the explanation that I didn't have time to see every student's piece of work twice, in that she persisted in showing me even after I'd explained and even though she'd apologised. I don't want apology, I just want them to respect that I cannot function if I am inundated with students. Clash between time available and desire to offer support. I became quite stressed with students as a line formed to see me at 11.50 after the class had finished.

The CVCP code of recommended practice on postgraduate teaching states that international students require sensitive treatment. However, have pressures on their time (Dickinson 1993; Macrae 1997): there is clearly a conflict between an institution's desired income and the level of resources available to deliver the service expected. This point is particularly pertinent to heavily-recruiting academic programmes on which the staff-student ratio is very high: staff may wish to offer students (home and international) a high level of academic support, but may not have sufficient time to meet the needs of all students.

3.2 Academic cultural differences

3.2.1 Learning resources

In the case of African and Russian students on the course, shock arose when they realised the extent of the use of computer technology in UK HE, increasing the pressure they were under from an academic point of view. As a Russian interviewee commented: e*verything is on computers. I'm afraid to go to the library the first time. In Russia people are not so computerising. In my country people prefer to do things without computers.*

This comment was echoed in the experience of some African students, unused to using computers for academic work in their country (in this study, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa), and upon whom the demand to learn a completely new skill in order to complete the course successfully placed huge stress (in terms of losing sleep due to the need to stay up all night to type out assignments, and to learn new computer programmes). None of these students expected the prevalence of word-processing and internet use, and when asked, all said they had not received pre-arrival information on the topic, reflecting a selectivity in the information forwarded to students. As noted by Furnham (1997), institutions need to be aware of all aspects of the sojourn that students will find distressing, and address as many as possible in advance in the form of pre-arrival information on the university and academic

requirements. However, it must be emphasised that dissonance in the extent of IT use affected only a minority of students.

3.2.2 Essay-writing and referencing

If culture shock refers to the removal of familiar cues (Hall 1959), then it follows that academic culture shock is the removal of familiar academic rules, and their replacement by strange conventions, exemplified for most students in the requirement to write essays and to reference any literature consulted. Much panic was expressed in the first 4 or 5 weeks of term, as reflected in this comment from a Russian interviewee:

In Russian, I know all the rules; I know how to manage myself to do everything. I'm sometimes hesitating because of some problems and different things. It's really really confusing for me.

Many students had never written an academic essay in English before, and had to learn this skill from scratch. A Japanese student offered a typical comment:

*It is difficult because there is such a big difference between the UK and Japanese style of approaching an essay, for example the Japanese will take a long time making a point, and will only go to it indirectly (*weaving movement made with hands*), whereas the UK style seems to be answer the question with supporting evidence.*

Common difficulties cited by students included essay structure, academic language, paragraph formation and introducing personal opinion. The need to reference information gleaned from secondary sources was problematic as many had never needed referenced secondary material before; and many were not familiar with the Harvard System. Whilst referencing procedure is easy to explain and to demonstrate, it was in the first month the most common subject in the hundreds of emails received: stress over this subject did not diminish until students had successfully demonstrated that they could follow referencing guidelines.

It must be pointed out that non-traditional British entrants to Higher Education such as mature students were similarly anxious about their ability to write essays and to follow referencing procedure, being equally unused to such conventions. Therefore, if academic culture shock is relevant as an explanation for difficulties in writing and referencing, this is as relevant to non-traditional home students as it is to international students. This is reflected in the nationality make-up of weekly in-sessional discipline-specific study support classes, which were attended by all students, regardless of nationality or language ability. The guidance offered in these sessions on academic conventions as well as the access offered to all students to email and tutorial contact to discuss assignments meant that students very early on acquired the necessary information to fulfil the required academic conventions, and thus this aspect of academic culture shock was short-lived, confirming the claim by Searle and Ward (1990) and Ward and Kennedy (1996) that the acquisition of sociocultural skills will offset culture shock.

3.2.3 Critical thinking

Whilst problems with writing style and referencing procedure could be faced by any student unused to academic conventions, concerns over critical thinking were really only expressed in this study by international students, particularly those from a dissimilar culture from the UK, confirming the contention by many writers that cultural dissimilarity dictates the level of shock experienced by sojourners (Boski 1990; Torbiorn 1994; Gudykunst 1998; Ward et al 2001). The need for critical thought in assignments presented much concern to the majority of students, and presented a longer-lasting difficulty, possibly because it posed more of a challenge to the *self*. As Gudykunst (1998) points out, cultural identity is acquired through socialisation as children, and any challenges to the self-concept will be met with resistance.

According to Hofstede (1991), students from countries high in Power Distance are uncomfortable with critical exchange and contradiction; they may not consider it appropriate to subject lecturers and academic texts to critical scrutiny. Therefore, it is commonly found that many international students do not engage in critical evaluation (Skelton and Richards 1991), and it was unsurprising that, in addition to stress over the high number of assignments, of particular concern for many students in this research was the prevalence in the UK of critical thinking, especially for students whose previous experience was of an academic system centred around passive, or rote, learning, as reflected in the following excerpts:

Actually you have to depend on yourself, do a lot of reading, do a lot of thinking, probably I have to depend on myself. I'm a little bit nervous, I feel that from now on I have some pressures, I already feel some pressures. Taiwanese interviewee

I'm very nervous about the prospect of writing assignments, as we are not used to critical thinking: in my country we just copy the tutor. We are not supposed to argue with the lecturer. we just go to the class and take notes. Chinese interviewee

Similarly, a Swiss students described her surprise at having to give her opinion on an academic subject, being used to summarising the work of the 'experts', but not showing agreement or disagreement:

I am enjoying the course, but nervous about the demand to undertake critical analysis, as this is something that we are not used to, there what students have to do is go to the lesson, listen and write down what the lecturer says, then recite it – listen, make notes and recite.

In study support classes and by email, questions were repeatedly asked about the vocabulary in assignment titles: that which created the most problems for students included phrases such as 'critically examine', 'critically evaluate', which are typical of Masters level assignments in the UK. Whilst students were willing to put in a huge amount of self-study, something which initially surprised them, but to which they adjusted quite quickly, they were less relaxed about arguing with what they read, and

offering their own judgement, a common refrain being, '*what do I know? How can I disagree with the professor?*' Thus there were repeated entreaties by lecturers to students to give their opinion, and assurances that it didn't matter if the opinion was right or wrong, that it wasn't necessary to agree with the lecturer.

The concern over expressing their own opinion can also be explained by the cultural dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance (UA): those from strong UA cultures look for certainty and expect their teachers, not the students, to have all the answers; argumentation and self-expression are not the norm (Hofstede 1991). However, in the UK, students are rewarded for the quality of their thinking and argument, and the application of knowledge to new problems (Skelton and Richards 1991; The British Council 1999). Whilst British students may need time to acquire the appropriate academic style in which to express their own opinion (Carroll 2005b), the notion of voicing opinion was not in itself shocking, as it was for many international students in this research. It would take students many months before they assimilated the required norm to engage with the literature they read (for some students, this was not achieved at all), with the result that many marks were lost under the criterion of critical evaluation.

3.2.4 Participation in discussion

Like critical thinking, the topic of participation in class is also related to national culture. Much anxiety was expressed by interviewees over the need to participate in class discussion, an academic difference noted in a survey by The British Council (1999). As Okorocha (1996) states, at first lectures and seminars can send students into learning shock: an observation confirmed in this study which found that most students sat silently in class for several months, rarely volunteering an answer unless picked on. Whilst contribution to discussion was not an accredited part of the Masters Programme, students knew that they should cultivate the skill of public speaking at some point, as they would have to prepare a group or individual presentation as part of one of their units of study, and besides, many were embarrassed by their lack of participation in contrast with the more voluble students in class. Many students had come from countries high in Power Distance, where education is teacher-centred, involving strict order in class, and limited participation from students (Hofstede 1991; Carroll and Ryan 2005). In such cultures, teachers do all the talking while students listen (Okorocha 1996); students from this type of culture were therefore not usually prepared for what they saw as a high level of interaction in class.

As Hofstede (1991) notes, a lecturer from a western country expects students to participate in class, they are expected to volunteer an opinion and to engage in debate. In countries low in Power Distance, such as the UK, education is a student centred process which treats students' and lecturers' opinions equally (Gudykunst, 1998). For many students, however, participation in class discussion was a demand that was overwhelming: unused to this convention, it would take many months before students

would make the adjustment and start speaking in class. According to Persaud (1993), participation in seminars is one of the most difficult adjustments, as the following extract from the field notes reflects:

Just taught study support class, consisting solely of Asian students, who sit passively until I pick on them, even the students who I know to be capable of answering questions are reticent to do so. Very tiring. Students sat mostly in nationality groups, and were for the most part very silent, very loath to answer questions. When called on by name, they spoke very quietly and shyly. Two hours of mostly me speaking. Exhausting! October 28

Cultural differences between Asian and European students in classroom behaviour (a distinction made by all Asian interviewees) were revealed in a scene in a study support class early on in the academic year:

Morning class – Asian students outnumber Europeans but it is painfully obvious how Europeans outclass Asian students in terms of participation and interaction. T (Russian) seems very aware that she is talking too much, and always hesitates before speaking but when she realises that no-one else will contribute she goes ahead. Some of the Asian students answer questions I ask but very hesitantly and quiet-voiced, and always with a rueful smile. When students are called on by name, they become panicky and apologetic if they don't know the answer. October 18

Many students in the cohort reacted to the passiveness of the mostly Asian students with irritation, as honestly articulated by the very linguistically able and confident Brazilian interviewee:
Why don't they speak? They are so quiet. I think it's a cultural thing. I think Asians are, as a rule, more quiet, more reserved. t I don't know why they are so afraid of saying things, because, you know, they are very good. I've met so many Asian people that were so quiet, but they were so intelligent.

The university seminar constitutes both a cultural and a linguistic challenge (Furneaux et al. 1991; Barker et al. 1991; McLean and Ransom 2005), as shown in the reasons given by students for not engaging in discussion: fear of embarrassment over language, and lack of confidence, confirming studies by Okorocha (1996) and Ballard and Clanchy (1997). Some students whose first language was English or whose English was near-native were noticeably shy in class; therefore language was not the barrier for them. On the other hand, as commented on enviously by the Chinese interviewee, students whose linguistic ability was the same as and sometimes inferior to many SE Asian students' language level participated extensively in class, seemingly immune to feelings of embarrassment or losing face:
Even if their pronunciation is not perfect, I think they are braver to express themselves, and I am always thinking about any mistakes I will make.

It would appear from observation of EAP classes that cultural difference played the biggest part in participation patterns in this study. Some change in behaviour was observed over time as students slowly grew more confident, their speed of adjustment being a function of motivation and personality,

both variables confirmed by Gudykunst (1998) and Berry (1994). But this was a painstakingly slow process, as students felt hindered not only by shyness but also by language deficiency. Change was brought about by the sensitively lecturer involving students, as advised by Ryan (2005a). When asked, students said that they wanted to be picked on; their lack of contribution was something they wanted to change. Therefore, whilst a relativist stance in lecturers is to be welcomed, including an awareness of western academic conventions and the difficulties many international students will face in open discussion (Ballard and Clanchy 1997; McLean and Ransom 2005), as well as sensitivity to speed and clarity of spoken English (Cammish 1997), students should be nevertheless sensitively encouraged to adapt to the norms of British academic culture, through introducing what Ryan (2005a) refers to as inclusive speaking and listening practices.

3.3 Language ability

In the literature on cross-cultural adjustment, there is debate among writers over whether or not greater importance should be attached to cultural or linguistic skills in successful adjustment. Similarly, when considering the stress suffered by international students in relation to the academic demands of the course, in addition to academic cultural differences, it is important to bear in mind the pressure imposed by communication in a foreign language (Carroll 2005a). One of the greatest sources of strain for the majority of participants in this study was the difficulty of acquiring sufficient linguistic competence to meet the academic demands of the course, confirming the observations of Persaud (1993), Blue (1993) and Ballard and Clanchy (1997). Non-traditional home students may face the problem of acquiring a new style of academic self-expression, but they do have the advantage of being native speakers of English. Most of the students in this study had taken an intensive course in English before they arrived, but the centrality of English to academic and sociocultural efficacy meant that the majority of the interviewees expressed a lot of anxiety over their level of English, particularly during the first round of interviews. The vocabulary used by interviewees to refer to English language ability includes words such as *nervous, scared, embarrassed, ashamed, not confident,* and *sh*y. Once students had realised the demanding nature of the academic task, they quickly recognised the importance of language ability, perhaps best reflected in a South African interviewee's account of her decision to study in the UK:
Something that made me not too nervous was maybe the language because our sponsor said 'you can choose any country but must mind, keep in mind that you don't choose a country where you have to struggle with the language'.

This student noted from observation of the student group that speed of reading and digesting information was impacted by language ability, as confirmed by a Taiwanese student:
Reading in English is so hard! I think I need to read twice or three times to get more understanding. I just tell myself, 'don't worry, don't be nervous'   October 25

It was recognised by all informants that proficiency in English was, as the student from South Africa declared: *a big advantage. Because I think for writing you have more idea. Otherwise you can't express yourself.* An Iranian student went as far as to equate deficiency in language with blindness: *When you can't speak English, then you don't have eyes. When you can't speak English you can't see anything. You can't see anything.*

Despite a very confident manner and outgoing nature, the Indonesian interviewee confessed to being

a little bit nervous because you know because of the language. For me I'm not confident enough because my English not good enough. The grammar is not good, something like that, vocabulary is not… I mean it's not like the native speaker, something like that. Before I left I took an English course, something like that. Because very very nervous. Oh my god! 'OK I have to do this.'

The agitation of students reached its peak on the day of the induction week English language test (used to place students into ability study support groups), as shown in the field notes:

The majority looked very anxious and insecure, most grimace when they hand in the test, and comments include: 'that was horrible', 'very difficult', 'I think I will be in the bottom group.' Does it remind them of their inadequacy? It's good to focus them on their needs and support available, but it is maybe not good for their self-esteem. September 29

Among interviewees, there was a common tendency to use self-deprecating language to refer to linguistic ability, a particular case being the Iranian student whose comments on her own level of English frequently contained self-denigrating language, including*: I am rubbish; I am really bad; People think I'm stupid.* Self-doubt and loss of face, with consequences for self-esteem, are common feelings among sojourners as they struggle to make themselves understood in the first few weeks (Hofstede 1991). For example, a Korean student came to show me her assignment, and was literally hiding her face with her hands, and bowing her head, telling me *don't look, don't look, it's terrible*. It pained her to show it to me, she was almost crying, yet this was the purpose of her visit, to get my feedback. Among many of the students, and particularly in the case of the Korean interviewee, accounts of attempts to cope linguistically were accompanied by facial gestures such as wincing and frowning, as well as nervous laughter, the latter, according to Scollon and Scollon (1995), being a common means, not acknowledged in western culture, of expressing embarrassment.

In the first three months of the academic sojourn, the greatest pressure is on the ability to understand and be understood (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997): this is reflected in the field notes as entry after entry point to the stress and anxiety experienced by students over language ability, as well as a sense of shame and inadequacy, particularly in contrast with better spoken European students. In addition, during the first month after students' arrival, I received over 60 email messages from students worried about their English and their ability to cope. Such was the level of distress experienced that many students contemplated leaving the course, after spending nights without sleep, appearing at my office in a state of agitation. An example is a Thai student, who came to my office in tears over her inability to understand everyday conversation as well as academic language: like most informants her aim was not

just to pass the course but also to learn something about life in the UK, something which her linguistic inadequacy barred her from pursuing. Despite achieving IELTS 6, she declared that her language wasn't good enough to succeed, and said that she wanted to go away and prepare herself more by taking another preparatory English course so she could return with more confidence. Her anxiety was reflected physically in pale, spotty skin, dark circles under her eyes, and a frowning harassed look on her face. The only time she smiled was when she was offered the reprieve of a new start, i.e. deferral until the next academic year.

Although they had achieved a score of at least 6 in IELTS (the minimum entry requirement of the majority of British universities), many students' language level was indeed poor in the beginning, sufficiently so to irritate the better English speaking informants, such as the Brazilian interviewee, who expressed his displeasure at their inadequacy:

I feel sometimes irritated with the fact that I see some people in the group, they really have extreme difficulty to express themselves in writing. In the class as a whole. Their ideas are good but they make so many grammar mistakes, the way they organise the sentence is so confusing.

In his opinion, the level of the course was brought down by most students' poor language level, who should not have been allowed on the course if their English was not fit, a view echoed by British students who questioned the competence of the majority of the cohort. He himself admitted that restricting the number of international students would only happen *in an ideal world, we don't live in an ideal world.* Given the stress caused by language difficulties, more rigorous screening for English language would be kinder, according to Carroll (2005a), a view echoed by the Iranian interviewee, who said in Interview 4 that IELTS 6 hadn't been high enough for her (or other students) to be able to cope with the course. It is highly unlikely however that British universities will increase their English language requirements for access onto degree programmes, even on intensive masters courses such as the one under discussion. In fact, there is evidence that some universities are actually lowering their entry level, to 4.5 in some extreme cases.

Hofstede (1991) argues that without linguistic ability, sociocultural adjustment is limited, an argument that can be applied to adaptation to academic culture, which is impeded by a lack of linguistic competence. It must be mentioned that improvement was made by most students in terms of linguistic ability, depending on the amount of cross-cultural interaction they enjoyed and their motivation. To varying degrees and at varying speeds, nearly all students made some linguistic progress, accordingly stress related to language ability slowly diminished over time, confirming the view that adjustment refers to a time process (Lysgaard 1955; Searle and Ward 1990; Ward and Kennedy 1996). However, the anxiety suffered by students over linguistic prowess should not be downplayed, particularly as good reading and writing skills are vital from the outset of the course, and any deficiency may be reflected in the marks students obtained for assignments.

4. Discussion: the link between stress and the well-being of international students

Kim (1988) defines mental illness as a subjective and/or objective disturbance in perception, thought, feeling, and behaviour that interferes with enjoyment of life, social interaction and successful performance. There is a well established link between stress and poor health (McIntosh and Kubena, 1999): the mental health literature documents a variety of stressful situations resulting from the failure of adaptation to changing circumstances, and resulting in psychological disturbance and an imbalanced internal capacity.

Ryan and Twibell (2000) define a stressful situation as challenging, threatening or harmful: a challenging situation taxes one's personal resources but holds a potential for growth; a threatening situation taxes or exceeds one's personal resources and hold the potential for harm or loss; a harmful situation is one in which harm has already occurred. In this study, stress had the capacity to be any one of the above three types. All students exhibited signs of stress, such as sleep deprivation and agitation in the first few weeks; temporarily at least then the stressful situation was harmful to health and stability. Phrases commonly found in the field notes include: *making herself ill, working so hard, worrying so much, very panicky, trouble sleeping, having nightmares every night, losing sleep, getting so stressed, appearance dreadful, blotchy, spotty, cold sores, rheumy eyes.*

A high level of panic caused by the academic task was confessed to by most students in this study (regardless of linguistic ability), as well encapsulated by the Iranian interviewee, who described her state of mind in Interview 2 as follows:

At the moment the only thing I have is the courses. Nothing else. It affect 100% on my life. I can't sleep, maybe 2 or 3 hours a night. I try to sleep but I can't, just think. And I wake up every day very early, 5, 4.30. I lie in bed. I feel so nervous! I think this January will kill me, so many essays. I think before I was 31 year old but now I am 41 year old, really. Just smoking, nothing more. Don't mind if I lose all my weight I don't mind. Sometimes I forget to eat. I try to eat but I can't. I feel, just am worry about my result.

This vignette of the anxiety caused by academic workload could apply to many of the 150-strong student cohort, including home students and those international students with a good level of English. What needs to be emphasised is that study-related stress is compounded by problems over language and academic cultural differences (Ryan and Carroll 2005). According to Ryan (2005b), international students tend to get more ill than home students, as do sojourners generally (Hofstede 2001). However, Crano and Crano (1993) argue that international students are not refugees, therefore we should not

overplay their distress, which is not usually debilitating. Indeed, in this study, for the vast majority of students, adjustment eventually took place; therefore the acculturative situation was stressful and taxing, but the outcome was ultimately positive. As Berry (1994) notes, there is a thin line between adaptation that enhances life chances, and an extreme experience that 'virtually destroys one's ability to carry on.' (p. 137) For the minority who left the course, the sojourn was harmful, resulting in serious, if short-term, ill-health manifestations. It is for this reason that among the many transitions in people's lives, which according to Giddens (1991) characterise the age of modernity, the move to a new environment is often cited as one of the most traumatic and threatening (Hamburg and Adams, 1967; Coelho et al., 1974; Hamburg et al. 1974; Kim 1988).

Searle and Ward (1990) point to a conceptualisation of culture shock in the literature as either a deficiency in coping skills, or as a psychological condition, which according to Furnham (1993) stigmatises the individual who cannot cope. Using a cultural skills learning approach can prepare students for the new academic culture, with study support helping students to acquire such skills as essay-writing and referencing. Equally, academic orientation before commencement of the programme can help to prepare students for academic cultural differences (Peacock and Brown 2006). However, this cannot (and in this study, did not) completely remove the stress caused by the extent of academic cultural differences, language difficulties and the pressurised intensity of a Masters course.

The findings in this study point to an at least temporary lowered mental health status, caused by, among other things, stress related to study demands. Academic support alleviated some of the distress experienced by students, as reflected in the large number of emails received offering gratitude for the support, but as expressed by the Russian interviewee, it was not until the last assignment was handed in that she felt released from a prison sentence. Crano and Crano (1993) warn researchers not to psychopathologise the international student sojourn. Nevertheless, the discomfort felt by students is real, and to avoid or minimise the incidence of breakdown which can occur when people move to surroundings (Gudykunst 1998), we cannot afford to overlook their distress, however temporary it may be.

5. Conclusion

In this research, stress was prevalent in the majority of students, particularly in the first semester, and was caused by academic cultural differences, the intensity of the assignment schedule, and language difficulties.

All students were placed under stress by the workload involved in the course, including home students. The use of ethnography as a research approach means that follow-up of informants is possible, and the researcher can make a judgement on whether adjustment takes place or not. By the time of the second interview in January when eight assignments had been completed, stress had not diminished, instead

there was a realisation in all interviewees of the seriousness of the academic task, which they had found harder than they had imagined: many still felt stressed and the impact of the workload involved in a Master's degree was continuing sleep deprivation. In regard to study stress, the U-Curve model of adjustment (Lysgaard 1955), which states that difficulties are at their peak in the initial stage does not apply, as stress only decreased in line with a reduced intensity in the assignment schedule.

In addition, a huge number of students were discomfited by confrontation with an alien academic culture, although some home students also had to face the challenge of adapting to unfamiliar conventions such as essay-writing and referencing, if they were unused to Higher Education. Overcoming the often painful experience of culture shock is usually a function of time (Lysgaard 1955; Searle and Ward 1990; Furnham 1993; Ward and Kennedy 1996), and involves a process of adaptation (Berry 1994). Similarly, being an extension of national culture, the academic culture of the new country requires an adjustment on the part of international students (Chan and Drover 1997). Whilst students often retain their ethnic heritage in many areas of their life in the UK, such as food practice and interaction patterns (as this study found), in the area of academic culture, the assimilation approach, defined by Berry (1994) as the renunciation of original culture norms and their replacement by the norms of the host culture, is the only option open to students if academic success is to be achieved. Adapting to new ways will be hard if there is a clash with deeply held personal and cultural beliefs, and for some students, adaptation is impossible (2005b). Where students are reluctant to adopt aspects of the new academic culture, such as critical engagement with the literature, the result will be either failure or reduced marks. In this study, the time it took to embrace unfamiliar academic norms varied among students, and the success of adjustment varied among individuals, depending on factors such as motivation and linguistic ability.

Finally, a further obstacle to many international students in this research was the lack of fit between their level of English language ability and the academic demands placed on them. If the intensity of the course and the academic cultural differences posed problems for the majority of students, for students whose language ability was minimal, stress was magnified. It is difficult to reach a clear conclusion over which is the more debilitating: language difficulties or cultural differences. There is debate in the literature over the place of culture and language in the adjustment process, with some writers highlighting the importance of language ability and others putting more emphasis on cross-cultural competence. In the academic arena, and in relation to this research, I would argue that academic success is impeded by poor language skills, yet linguistic competence alone will not guarantee adjustment. Students should be linguistically and culturally competent in order to cope with the intensive assignment schedule previously alluded to.

The high level of stress experienced by students in this research reinforces the need for academic orientation which addresses academic cultural differences in advance of the start of the course and for in-sessional discipline-specific study support, which should begin in the first week of the new semester, when stress is at its highest (Ackers 1997; Lord and Dawson 2002; Durkin and Main, 2002). Linguistic

competence needs to be in place by the start of the course, or needs to be achieved very quickly (through self-improvement strategies and maximisation of English language speaking opportunities). To address stress caused or exacerbated by language difficulties, the responsibility to improve language level resides with the student, as it is unlikely that universities will increase their language requirements, given the dependence of institutions on fees from international students, no matter how ethically driven we may wish recruitment to become.

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