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Between languages and worlds: identity shift and language socialization among international students in U.S. higher education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the identity development of five international students during their degree studies at a U.S. university. Drawing on identity and second language socialization theories, the study used a qualitative and interpretivist approach through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and background questionnaires. Participants, who were notably diverse in terms of national origin, educational level, and linguistic background, reflected on their experiences of cultural and academic adjustment during long-term study in the U.S. higher education context. Four themes emerged: (a) context-driven communicative confidence, (b) shifting identities in a new cultural context, (c) social integration and relationship barriers, and (d) strategic communication and daily adaptation. Participants described ongoing negotiations of self as they engaged with new linguistic, academic, and social expectations. Their narratives reveal how identity shifts were influenced by emotional responses, peer relationships, institutional dynamics, and communicative practices. The study highlights the need for more inclusive and culturally responsive university environments that support international students' sense of belonging, confidence, and personal growth. Although the study is conducted in a U.S. institutional setting, the findings offer implications about international student identity development processes relevant to higher education contexts more broadly.

Introduction

Being an international student is a complex experience shaped by the new cultural, linguistic, academic, and social environments students encounter in their host country as well as students' own cultural backgrounds, aspirations, and life histories (Gomes and Tran 2017; Kaya 2020; Marginson 2014). International students participate in a variety of new academic and social communities, interact with others in those communities, and through this develop a new sense of self. Research shows that international students' identities are dynamic and continually shaped through their experiences with cultural differences and personal adaptation (Soltani, Tran, and Reza 2022; Tavares 2021). Language plays a central role in this adaptation process, not only for communication but as a means of cultural engagement, identity formation, and social recognition (Duff 2010a, 2019; Lu 2024; Ou and Gu 2021).

The global rise in international student mobility has been facilitated by broader global mobility and increased international connectivity, while also reflecting students' aspirations for personal

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growth, intercultural competence, and access to academic and professional opportunities (Ellis, Jola, and Cameron 2024; Lee and Song 2019; Martinsen et al. 2010). Universities have pursued internationalization by recruiting international students, developing international partnerships, and establishing English language programs (Ammigan and Bentahar 2024; de Wit 2020). English, as a global lingua franca, is a factor influencing language-learning priorities and contributes to the U.S. being a top destination. As a consequence, English's global dominance can influence institutional language ideologies and language-learning priorities in ways that marginalise multilingual resources (Lanvers 2011; Ushioda 2017). At the same time, as the primary medium of academic participation and institutional legitimacy, English structures how international students access recognition and belonging within higher education. In the 2024–2025 academic year, approximately 1.2 million international students were enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions, with over half pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees (Institute of International Education 2025). Comparable trends are evident in other English-dominant higher education systems, including Australia (820,000), Canada (1 million), and the United Kingdom (732,000) (ICEF Monitor 2025), which similarly host substantial international student populations. Yet research on transnational education has concentrated mainly on Western students in short-term programmes (Kinginger 2012; Lee and Song 2019), with little research on the long-term academic and social experiences of degree-seeking students in the U.S.

Language socialization provides a useful framework for examining international students' identity development as it highlights how learners acquire not only linguistic competence but also the social norms, values, and roles that influence their evolving sense of self. Through everyday interaction, students learn to speak, act, and think in culturally situated and socially meaningful ways (Duff 2011; Haneda 2009), supporting their language development and evolving identities as capable members of their new academic and social communities (Norton and Toohey 2011). While prior research has established that language socialization and identity shift are closely intertwined, less attention has been paid to how identity shift manifests in differentiated ways through everyday communicative practices, particularly among international students engaged in long-term degree study in the U.S. In such contexts, students continually face issues of belonging, legitimacy, and personal agency, yet the specific processes through which identity shift unfolds across academic and social interactions remain insufficiently theorised (Fisher et al. 2020; Soltani, Tran, and Reza 2022).

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how five degree-seeking international students in U.S. higher education experience identity shift as a socially mediated process. Informed by language socialization, it focuses on how identity is reshaped through everyday communication, academic participation, and interpersonal interaction. Specifically, the study explores how identity shift manifests across different domains, including changes in values, interpersonal conduct, and communicative confidence, as students engage with new linguistic, cultural, and institutional expectations over time. By foregrounding participants' own accounts of identity shift across academic and social spaces, the study extends work on academic discourse socialization by highlighting how inclusion and legitimacy are negotiated in everyday classroom and campus practices. These insights can inform how universities design advising, teaching, and community-building structures to support degree-seeking international students' long-term participation and wellbeing.

Literature review

Identity and language socialization in transnational higher education

Identity is now widely recognised as a central concern in second language learning, particularly in transnational contexts where learners' sense of self may shift in response to new discourses, norms, and interactions (Li and Gong 2025; Norton 2013). Identity is not a stable or singular construct; it is shaped through participation in social practices, including language use, classroom interaction, peer

networks, and institutional engagement. Language learners negotiate who they are and who they can become through their access to and participation in these practices (Norton and Toohey 2011). In this view, language is not only a medium of communication but also a site where identities are constructed, contested, and transformed.

To further understand identity development, language socialization offers a valuable framework for examining how learners construct their identities through engagement in academic, institutional, and everyday interactions. Language socialization is the process by which individuals acquire the linguistic, cultural, and social knowledge that enables them to communicate and participate in a community (Duff 2010a; Duff 2010b; Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Ochs and Schieffelin 2017). According to Schieffelin and Ochs (1986), language socialization consists of two closely related processes: individuals are socialised both to use language and through the use of language. That is, as individuals learn linguistic structures, they simultaneously learn the sociocultural norms, values, and ideologies embedded in language practices. This includes not only grammatical and pragmatic competence but also an understanding of the broader social meanings that language conveys (Duff 2007; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984, 2008).

In second language (L2) learning, socialization becomes more complex, as learners must navigate both linguistic development and integration into new cultural and social environments (Duff 2010a, 2011). Unlike first language (L1) socialization, L2 socialization involves learners who already possess linguistic and cultural traditions and must adapt to new discourse practices and unfamiliar academic, professional, or social norms (Duff 2007; Duff and Talmy 2011). In higher education, this process is particularly consequential: international students are expected to acquire discipline-specific genres, rhetorical conventions, and institutional norms related to participation, authorship, and knowledge construction (Duff 2010a); however, these norms can be challenging to access and internalise.

Empirical research highlights the dynamic and negotiated nature of this process. For instance, Kobayashi (2016) conducted a longitudinal case study of a Japanese undergraduate in Canada who gradually developed academic discourse competence through tasks like oral presentations. The study shows how academic discourse socialization was affected by evolving participation, scaffolded guidance, and the learner's agentive strategies over time, highlighting the dynamic and ongoing nature of language socialization across both academic and social contexts. Similarly, Itoi and Mizukura (2024) found that students in bilingual classrooms had to negotiate competing expectations, particularly in group work, requiring both linguistic proficiency and awareness of interactional expectations.

In a related study, Fei (2016) examined Chinese multilingual students in Canadian universities and found that classroom participation was influenced by race, language ideologies, and institutional discourses. Students often faced power imbalances and were perceived through deficit perspectives, limiting their ability to contribute. Fei's findings emphasise that academic participation is not simply a matter of language proficiency but is influenced by symbolic capital and positionality. Likewise, Phan (2023) analyzed how international doctoral students in Denmark developed academic identities within institutional and sociocultural contexts. The study revealed that identity development involved more than language ability; it required navigating institutional hierarchies, seeking recognition, and strategically positioning themselves within academic communities.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that international students' L2 socialization involves more than linguistic and academic adaptation; it is a deeply social process that requires navigating academic hierarchies, social expectations, and cultural norms, through which new academic and personal identities are continually negotiated and reshaped both inside and beyond the classroom. This body of work on academic discourse socialization informs the present study by serving as a lens for identifying moments in participants' narratives where they interpret, adopt, resist, or seek access to academic discourse norms and link these experiences to identity shifts.

The role of language socialization, peer networks, and community

Language socialization extends beyond formal instruction; it is also shaped through everyday interactions, peer networks, and broader community engagement (Baquedano-López and Hernández 2011; Duff 2007, 2010a). For international students, these informal spaces are critical for developing communicative competence and adjusting to the sociocultural demands of the host environment. In highly internationalised higher education contexts, however, the presence of diverse student populations does not automatically lead to sustained intercultural interaction. Marangell and D'Orazzi (2023), in their study of Australian universities, found that students often conceptualised internationalization primarily in terms of demographic diversity, while meaningful cross-cultural engagement remained uneven. This suggests that structural internationalization does not necessarily translate into everyday interaction, shaping the conditions under which peer networks develop.

Peer networks, especially among co-nationals or other international students, often serve as essential sources of emotional and practical support during the early phases of adjustment. These networks offer shared understanding, emotional comfort, and guidance for navigating unfamiliar environments. Paradowski, Jarynowski, and Czopek (2022), in a longitudinal social network analysis of 41 study abroad students, found that many primarily interacted with co-nationals or other international peers due to shared language and cultural familiarity. These connections eased social anxiety and helped foster a sense of belonging. Similarly, D'Orazzi and Marangell (2025) found that relationships among culturally and linguistically diverse students contributed to emotional adjustment, academic confidence, and inclusive learning environments.

However, such support networks can also limit exposure to local discourse norms and host language interaction (Isabelli-García et al. 2018; Trice 2004). Heavy reliance on familiar linguistic groups may reduce opportunities to practice the host language and hinder the acquisition of sociopragmatic skills. Zhou and Rose (2023) reinforce this point in their study of Chinese students in the UK, where participants often remained socially embedded within L1 peer groups and had limited engagement with local or international peers. While these circles offered comfort and affirmed students' identities, they also restricted broader social integration. This tension highlights the dual role of co-national networks as both supportive and limiting.

A longitudinal study by Sauer and Ellis (2019) further shows that co-national networks, personal initiative, and the openness of the host community influenced students' L2 engagement. In some settings, learners needed to actively seek out interaction, a task for which they were not always equipped or motivated. Co-national peers, while supportive, sometimes inadvertently reduced students' drive to use the host language. These findings echo those of Isabelli-García et al. (2018), who emphasised that meaningful interaction with host language users was key to developing communicative competence and cultural understanding.

Similarly, Boz, Barrantes, and Tweedie (2018) found that, despite formal instruction in academic English, students struggled with sociolinguistic competence due to limited interaction with L1 speakers and access to authentic communication environments. Even advanced students encountered difficulties with speech acts and everyday interactions, impeding both fluency and social integration. Soltani and Zhang (2023) likewise found that supportive campus spaces facilitated peer and faculty engagement, reinforcing the importance of socially embedded learning.

Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015) further illustrate that students' academic socialization occurs through individualised 'networks of practice,' encompassing formal settings and informal interactions with peers, instructors, and institutional agents. These networks provided varying degrees of access to academic norms and genres and often required learners to take initiative in forming relationships and seeking mentorship.

Together, these studies underscore that language socialization is socially situated. It depends not only on classroom learning but also on students' networks and the communities in which they participate. While co-national and international peer groups offer vital emotional and linguistic

support, broader engagement with host language users and culturally diverse communities is essential for developing sociolinguistic competence and achieving fuller academic integration.

Shifting identity through language socialization

Research on language socialization has shown that identity development in multilingual higher education is closely connected to how learners participate in academic and social practices. In her study of second-language academic communities, Morita (2004) demonstrates that students' academic identities are negotiated through access to participation in classroom discourse, with engagement, silence, and perceived competence shaped by interactional expectations rather than by individual ability alone. Extending this work, Morita (2012) emphasises the situated nature of identity, showing how learners are positioned by others and position themselves within multilingual classrooms, with these positions influencing their opportunities for participation and recognition. From this perspective, identity shift can be understood as emerging through learners' ongoing engagement with new communicative expectations and social roles, as they navigate participation, legitimacy, and belonging in higher education contexts (Norton 2013), where legitimacy is tied to learners' perceived recognition and acceptance as competent members of academic and social communities. As international students participate in academic and social practices, their experiences of belonging, confidence, and legitimacy are shaped through everyday interactions across institutional contexts.

L2 socialization also often involves reshaping students' social positioning and sense of self. Clément and Norton (2021) introduce the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality, suggesting that learners' investment in language learning is influenced by the perceived social value of the target language and its potential to grant access to more powerful social positions. This perspective frames language learning as both an act of identity transformation and a pathway to broader social inclusion.

This dynamic is visible in study abroad contexts, where learners re-evaluate their self-concepts as they engage with new environments (Kinginger 2013). Benson et al. (2012) found that students experienced identity shifts as they navigated new social and academic norms. Their L2 use influenced their self-concept, particularly in relation to their competence and confidence in academic and social contexts.

Beaven and Spencer-Oatey's (2016) longitudinal study of Angela, an Erasmus student, illustrates how identity transformation can emerge through social interaction. Initially finding that using English limited how she presented her identity, Angela gained confidence and felt more authentic through her regular interactions with peers. Her journey highlights the emotional and social dimensions of language socialization beyond linguistic development. Plews (2015) observed similar processes among Canadian students in Germany, who developed hybrid identities, a process Plews calls intercultural identity alignment. This shift in identity was driven not only by language immersion but also by engagement with various communities of practice. Importantly, the study showed that students' sense of legitimacy and personal agency within the host culture was influenced by how welcomed they felt and the extent to which they were able to participate meaningfully.

Fisher et al. (2020) also emphasise the co-construction of identity through classroom discourse and social interaction. In their study, multilingual learners continuously negotiated identity in response to peer interactions, academic expectations, and institutional norms. In a U.S. context, Shi (2011) examined how power and access to discourse shaped identity shifts of multilingual students, finding that students' positioning as either legitimate or marginal participants depended on their ability to access and appropriate linguistic and cultural norms of the academic community. Identity shifts were tied not just to language learning but to navigating institutional ideologies that governed who could be seen as an 'insider.' Soltani, Tran, and Reza (2022) found that international students in Australia underwent identity transformation through a process of 'becoming,' where students gradually adjust their cultural and linguistic selves to fit their new academic settings. This adaptation built confidence but also brought emotional strain and cultural conflict. Tavares

(2021), in a narrative study of international postgraduates, similarly found that longer engagement with the host language and culture led to feelings of distance from pre-existing identities. Identity shifts were not additive but reconstructive, involving new self-perceptions and altered group affiliations.

Across these studies, a common thread is the inseparability of language socialization and identity shift. Identity change is an ongoing, nonlinear process, conditioned by individual agency, institutional norms, social interaction, and emotional engagement. For adult international students, these shifts are often compounded by the complexities of life-stage transitions and long-term responsibilities.

Building on this research, the present study explores how international students in the U.S. experience identity transformation and language socialization. It investigates how students navigate new communicative practices, establish relationships, and adjust to unfamiliar academic and social expectations. In doing so, it considers how language use becomes a key part of adjusting to academic expectations and cultural norms, also exploring how language use serves as a central tool for constructing new academic and social identities and how students perceive themselves and their place within this new context.

Methods

Research design

A qualitative and interpretivist approach was employed, informed by foundational work in L2 socialization (Duff 2010b; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984) and study abroad research (Kinginger 2009). This study aimed to understand how students' sense of self changes as they navigate new social, linguistic, and academic experiences. Therefore, the study focused on subjective interpretations, personal narratives, and sociocultural processes of learning and adaptation rather than seeking generalizable patterns or measurable outcomes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and background questionnaires focused on learners' lived experiences and self-perceptions.

Participants and recruitment

Five international students were recruited through snowball sampling, a method commonly used in qualitative research that relies on participant referrals within social networks to reach the target population (e.g. Kirchherr and Charles 2018; Norton 2013; Patton 2002). Participants were enrolled in undergraduate, Master's, or PhD programs at a large public university in the Midwestern U.S. and came from diverse national backgrounds, including China, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Bangladesh (see Table 1 for demographic information).

While academic major and duration of stay were not criteria in the selection process, the recruitment prioritised linguistic and national diversity. This allowed for the examination of how students with different sociolinguistic experiences engage with language in academic and everyday contexts, how they perceive their identity shifts, and how they manage challenges in a new cultural environment. A relatively high level of English proficiency was required for participants to effectively communicate their experiences in English and reflect critically on their personal journeys.

The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and all participants gave informed consent and participated voluntarily. Pseudonyms were used for anonymity.

Data collection procedures

Data collection comprised two stages:

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Name	Age	Country	Programme	L1	English Learning Age	English Proficiency	Test Score	Time in the U.S.	Language Programme
Matt	31	China	PhD, communication & information	Mandarin Chinese	8	Advanced	Duolingo 135	> 2 years	None
Zara	31	Pakistan	PhD, English literature	Urdu	4	Advanced	TOEFL 116	> 2 years	None
Lina	30	China	MS, business analytics	Mandarin Chinese	19	Upper-intermediate	Duolingo 120	> 2 years	ESL & conversation partner programmes
Sara	48	Indonesia	BS, nursing	Indonesian	10	Upper-intermediate	Institutional ESL completion	~2 years	ESL & conversation partner programmes
Amir	37	Bangladesh	MA, TESL	Bangla	3	Advanced	IELTS 7	1–2 years	None

Note: All names are pseudonyms, and proficiency is self-reported.

1. **Background Questionnaire:** An online survey gathered demographic and linguistic information. This information was used to contextualise participants' experiences and inform the follow-up interview.
2. **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person (n = 2) or online (n = 3), depending on participants' preference. The interviews, which lasted between 60 and 90 min, were designed to elicit narratives about participants' academic, social, and linguistic experiences in the U.S. through open-ended questions regarding social integration, cultural adjustment, perceptions of identity, and adaptation strategies.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of the five interviews were transcribed and organised alongside the background questionnaire responses to form a unified dataset. Minor grammatical adjustments and removal of repetitive fillers were made to participant quotations to enhance readability while preserving the original meaning and tone. Open coding was conducted with reference to key theoretical frameworks, including identity negotiation (Norton 2013) and language socialization (Duff, 2010b), while remaining open to emergent themes. Following Dawadi's (2020) approach, the data were read repeatedly to identify recurring expressions, behaviours, and reflections related to linguistic and cultural adjustment.

The data analysis followed a constant comparative approach as described by Schloss and Smith (1999), involving recursive engagement with qualitative data to uncover themes, patterns, and relationships across cases. Specifically:

1. Data from the five participants were reviewed in full to develop an initial sense of each case.
2. The interview transcripts were open-coded to capture recurring experiences and meanings across cases. For example, initial codes of *phone-call anxiety*, *accent comprehension difficulty*, and *fear of negative evaluation* were grouped into a broader category of *communication challenges*. Similarly, codes such as *withholding contributions in class*, *politeness monitoring*, and *uncertainty about participation norms* were grouped into a category of *academic socialization and legitimacy*.
3. Additional review of the data allowed for further elaboration of each category, with a focus on identifying variation and differences within themes like academic socialization, linguistic vulnerability, and identity transformation.
4. Themes were refined through comparison and synthesis, with some themes being merged, expanded, or removed based on the consistency and relevance of the data.
5. Patterns were traced across participants to highlight how language use and adaptation were influenced by institutional expectations, social interactions, and their perceived belonging.
6. Thematic categories were finalised once thematic sufficiency was reached, and no substantially new patterns emerged across participants.

This analytic process revealed how international students negotiated their participation, legitimacy, and evolving identities within U.S. academic and social contexts.

Results

Four themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) context-driven communicative confidence, (2) shifting identities in a new cultural context, (3) social integration and relationship barriers, and (4) strategic communication and everyday adaptation. These themes illustrate how participants engaged with language and culture in their academic and social environments. Grounded in language socialization theory, the analysis shows how students' communication practices were related to their evolving identities, relationships, and participation in the host culture.

Context-driven communicative confidence

All participants reported communication challenges in English, especially outside academic contexts. While they generally felt more confident in classroom discussions and academic writing, informal and spontaneous interactions such as phone calls, casual conversations, or encounters involving unfamiliar accents provoked anxiety and self-doubt. These challenges were often compounded when interlocutors spoke quickly, used culturally specific language, or showed impatience.

One participant, Matt, described how phone calls remained stressful despite years of experience:

> … one scenario I'm still struggling with is calling, maybe a company or someone to schedule an appointment … It's very difficult to talk with people through the phone, especially when the people on the other end don't speak standard English, because I learned English using the most standard materials, but here we can hear different accents, so sometimes the call center does not speak very standard English. So that's a struggle for me, even [though] I have been here for more than two years. (Matt)

Matt's experience illustrates how formal language education often does not prepare students for informal, unpredictable communication. His discomfort reflects not just gaps in linguistic knowledge but limited exposure to the variable, socially embedded English used in everyday contexts. From a language socialization perspective, this highlights how communicative competence involves more than linguistic knowledge; it includes participation in the social practices where that language is used.

Zara shared a similar concern, but with metaphors and idioms that carry cultural meaning:

> Sometimes there are instances when somebody uses a phrase or a metaphor that I've never come across before, that's very specific to the culture. However, I'm able to kind of infer what they are trying to say. But I'm not quite sure what it means. (Zara)

Zara's difficulty lies not in grammar or vocabulary, but rather with the metaphors, humour, and figures of speech that require shared cultural knowledge. Although she can infer the intent, uncertainty persisted, making her participation in social conversations more effortful and less confident. At the same time, her ability to infer meaning despite uncertainty demonstrates strategic communicative competence, reflecting active engagement with culturally embedded language rather than withdrawal from interaction. In language socialization terms, Zara is negotiating the implicit cultural rules that govern how language is used.

Like Matt and Zara, Lina's experiences reveal that communication challenges are situated within specific social contexts. Lina's experiences revealed how self-perceived competence fluctuated based on social context and the proficiency of others:

> I use a very high standard to mark myself. So, I think I should, because I already learned English for many years and I am studying abroad in America. So, I hope I can talk close to the native language speakers. Actually, my capability is not rich … if you enter an environment and you already know the other person, maybe have a higher English level than me, then I will not be so confident. I already know my English is not so good … inside, I will know I'm not so good like a native speaker. (Lina)

Lina's reflections show the emotional weight carried by linguistic performance. Lina's self-assessment is grounded not in an objective measure, but in how she positions herself relative to others, especially L1 speakers or those perceived as having higher proficiency. This aligns with what language socialization scholars identify as the 'affective dimension' of socialization, where learners internalise social hierarchies of language use and ideal speaker norms. Over time, this can affect not only how individuals use language but how they see themselves as (il)legitimate participants in various communities of practice (Duff 2010a).

Lina also described the emotional fallout from communication breakdowns, particularly when listeners showed impatience:

> When I talk, if the talker is giving feedback and is not patient, I will be a little nervous and will be a little afraid to talk again. (Lina)

This points to the two-way nature of language socialization. The attitudes of interlocutors, whether supportive or dismissive, influence learners' willingness to participate and their evolving identity as competent communicators. Impatience or lack of accommodation from others can lead to silence and reinforce feelings of inadequacy. Such moments illustrate how interactional alignment and responsiveness shape learners' willingness to participate. In Lina's case, these moments generated anxiety and self-doubt, which contributed to her hesitation in future interactions.

The experiences shared by Matt, Zara, and Lina show that their struggles with interactional expectations, pragmatic uncertainty, and self-judgment are not simply individual issues, but they are rooted in broader processes of socialization shaped by cultural expectations, the responses they receive from others, and their own beliefs about what it means to be a competent English speaker.

Identity-shift pathways

All participants described changes in their self-perception. While the extent and nature of these changes varied, there was a shared sense of reflection, personal growth, and evolving identity, and they followed three distinct pathways: critical cultural re-evaluation, behavioural-value transformation, and additive confidence building.

These shifts were influenced by daily interactions, academic experiences, and increased independence. Living in a new culture and using a second language involved not only behavioural adaptation but active negotiation of personal identity. This ongoing negotiation is closely tied to language socialization, as participants were not only acquiring new linguistic skills but also participating in new discourses and social roles that gradually transformed their self-perception.

Zara offered one of the most direct reflections on cultural reevaluation. She described how living in the U.S. affected her views on gender norms in Pakistan:

> I think there were a lot of things in Pakistan that I was tolerating or was considering acceptable because of the cultural norms and thinking that there was no other choice. But like having been in the U.S. and having had time to myself, I would say, I have less tolerance for mistreatment, cultural mistreatment of women especially … I would say, they [people] do [think I'm different]. They do think I'm less likely to tolerate certain behaviors than I was before. (Zara)

Zara's reference to 'having had time to myself' suggests that physical distance from home, combined with exposure to different discourses, allowed her to form new values and develop a stronger sense of agency, particularly in relation to gender and social justice. She also expressed a nuanced view of intercultural identity growth:

> You need to leave home and immerse yourself in another culture and learn how to hold on to your identity while also growing as a person … It's good to adapt, figure out a new culture, and see what things are like and how you can grow as a person. (Zara)

Here, Zara presents identity as dynamic, something that can expand through experience without necessarily erasing one's roots. However, she also expressed uncertainty about her place between two cultures:

> I haven't been home this whole time … I do wonder, like when I go back, will things seem very different? Will I feel like I don't belong here? … what if I don't belong when I go back home either? Like, where will I belong then? That's the thing that I worry about! (Zara)

This reflection underscores feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence associated with identity transformation. Zara's 'in-between' state reflects the liminality many transnational students experience. It is a space that may feel unclear or unsettled, but it also holds potential for growth, where identity is continuously negotiated through experiences with language, culture, and self-reflection.

Other participants described shifts in interpersonal behaviour. Amir reflected on how his approach to conflict changed:

> In Bangladesh, maybe I would be reactive in many situations. But here I am not. Here, maybe if you shout at somebody or react negatively, it might affect me [having negative consequences]. So, it's making me more tolerant and more patient, and thoughtful … like somebody's talking, okay, let's dig out what could be the problem, instead of, like, having any verbal fighting … and I will definitely keep them [traits like tolerance or patience] because it will enrich me as a person and when I'm listening to other people like, I mean they feel valued … (Amir)

Amir describes identity change as behavioural and interpersonal. His shift toward patience and reflective listening reflects alignment with new cultural norms and values. Rather than seeing this change as a loss of his cultural self, Amir presents it as a form of growth and expansion of how he thinks and interacts within a different cultural frame. Amir's transformation demonstrates how identity is constructed not only through language use but through participation in new ways of thinking, speaking, and interacting. As Norton (2013) notes, language learners invest in particular social practices because they are tied to the kinds of identities they wish to claim. Amir's shift toward more patient and thoughtful communication reflects his growing alignment with the values of his new community and his evolving sense of self within it.

Sara described her transformation in more personal, gradual terms:

> My personality [has] not changed, I think like adding some more stuff [qualities] to it, like more confidence … I am studying in another language, so I'm more confident because of what I achieved so far, which for me is good. (Sara)

For Sara, identity development involved growth in confidence and self-perception rather than a change in values or behaviour. Her increased self-confidence came from navigating daily life and education in a second language. She framed her identity evolution as an additive process, building on existing traits rather than replacing them.

In line with research on L2 identity (e.g. Norton 2013; Tavares 2021), the findings suggest that identity development among international students is mediated through interaction, reflection, and emotional engagement, and is gradual and nonlinear. Building on this literature, the present study identifies three distinct pathways of identity shift: re-definition of core cultural values; re-alignment of interpersonal conduct; and incremental, skill-based change. These pathways were illustrated by participants' varied experiences: for Zara, transformation was linked to new cultural values and critical reflection; for Amir, it involved emotional and behavioural adjustment; and for Sara, it was marked by confidence and personal resilience. Across all cases, language use emerged as both the medium and the outcome of identity transformation, occurring through participation in new discourses and roles. Together, these findings underscore that identity transformation among international students is not a uniform process but is shaped by how learners navigate tensions between past identities and emerging roles in new environments.

Social integration and relationship barriers

This theme captures both participants' efforts toward social integration and the relational barriers that complicated those efforts. While participants expressed openness to cross-cultural friendships, they reported persistent challenges in forming meaningful relationships with domestic students. Friendships with other international or culturally similar peers were common and often provided greater comfort, shared understanding, and ease of communication. In contrast, relationships with U.S. students were often described as limited, surface-level, or difficult to initiate, primarily due to language confidence, cultural distance, time constraints, and preexisting social networks.

Lina expressed this sense of exclusion and hesitation when trying to connect with American peers:

> People [have] lived here a long time … They are very kind and good people. But they already have their friends' group, so I think I don't need to jump into their long relationship. Also, my English is not good … (Lina)

Lina's comment points to both structural and self-perception factors that affected her experience. The presence of established social circles, combined with doubts about her English ability, discouraged deeper engagement. Her hesitation reflects her perception that long-standing friendships among domestic students are difficult to enter, regardless of how kind those students may be. Lina's hesitation also reflects uncertainty about how to position herself within established social networks. Her self-perceived linguistic limitations, combined with structural barriers such as pre-existing peer groups, constrained her willingness to initiate deeper engagement, thereby narrowing opportunities for fuller participation.

Matt described a similar experience regarding the social separation he observed on campus:

> I don't make a lot of domestic friends on campus. I feel they have their own family. They have their own circle, so they tend to have fun together. So, they are more familiar with each other, and share the same culture, so I feel they don't want to talk with international students a lot … especially during spring break or Christmas, they will go back to their hometown to be with their families. (Matt)

Matt emphasised how domestic students' family ties and shared culture create social cohesion that is difficult for international students to access. For Matt, the challenge is not about language, but about belonging to pre-existing social structures that create a sense of belonging for domestic students. In contrast, international students often remain outside of these networks, especially during holidays and breaks, when many peers return home or spend time with long-time friends. These forms of exclusion are often unintentional but arise from the natural pull of established communities, which makes it harder for newcomers to feel fully included.

At the same time, Matt observed that the American friends he did make tended to be those who were themselves on the margins of dominant social groups, like students who lacked strong ties on campus or who showed personal interest in learning about different cultures. He noted:

> Some of the American friends I made here, I think, they don't have a community around here, or they don't know many people around campus, or they are curious about Asian culture. Some of them like Japanese animations when they were kids, so they are interested in Asian culture themselves, so they want to make more Asian friends. (Matt)

Matt's observation suggests that cross-cultural friendship is more likely to develop when both sides share a sense of social distance or when domestic students show curiosity and openness about other cultures. These connections often emerge not within dominant social circles but at the margins, where mutual interests or cultural appreciation create opportunities for meaningful interaction.

Zara also reflected on the subtle challenges of connecting with domestic peers and contrasted them with the ease she felt among other international students:

> When I'm hanging out with people who are international students, we already have a shared set of problems and concerns. So, that thing already exists between you and these people. Whereas if I'm hanging out with people who are native to the US, there is that slight space in the beginning where you have to introduce yourself and explain where you're coming from and so on. And then they realize that your life looks different from theirs in both daily life and overall life. So that kind of thing is where you're noticing that my life is different from what theirs looks like, whereas with international students, we all know what our lives look like. (Zara)

Her reflection underscores that social integration involves more than language proficiency or physical presence. It requires navigating differences in worldview, daily routines, and cultural expectations. With other international students, these negotiations are largely unnecessary; shared experiences such as language barriers, homesickness, and cultural adjustment create immediate understanding. In contrast, connecting with domestic peers often means explaining one's background and bridging unspoken cultural gaps, effort that can create emotional distance, especially in casual or informal settings.

What Zara described as a 'slight space' may not prevent relationships from forming, but it does complicate the process. Her experience suggests that even with openness on both sides, differences in lived experience can slow the development of closeness. For many international students,

friendships with peers from similar backgrounds feel more intuitive, require less explanation, and often provide deeper emotional support over time. Lina echoed this preference for cultural familiarity:

> I have more Asian friends because we are all from Asian area, so we have some similar culture with each other, we can understand each other's way of thinking and some methods of doing things. So, we can get each other's minds very quickly for some parts. (Lina)

Similarly, Zara shared how her L1 remained a core part of her social identity:

> I probably end up spending a lot of my time with the Pakistanis. And there's a comfort level there, and here we just talk in Urdu. We feel like nothing is Pakistani. The only Pakistani thing left is the language. So, we use that more! (Zara)

These reflections illustrate how cultural familiarity can ease communication and foster connection. Even among students from different countries within the same region, similar values and ways of thinking can create a strong foundation for friendship. Zara's comment about Urdu being 'the only Pakistani thing left' highlights how language can preserve cultural identity when other familiar elements are distant. In such contexts, language becomes not just a communication tool but a source of emotional comfort and belonging, helping to recreate a sense of home even when far away.

Yet Zara also acknowledged the unpredictability of social connections. While she initially expected to form stronger bonds with other Pakistanis or international students, her experience turned out to be more subtle:

> But still, I would say it completely depends. I used to think that I would have more meaningful relationships with people from Pakistan or with international students, but honestly, some people have become really close to me, even though they have nothing in common and they're [American] people … (Zara)

Zara's experience shows that while cultural background and shared experiences often form the foundations of international students' social networks, those networks are not fixed.

Taken together, these accounts show that international students' social integration is influenced by a mix of comfort, effort, and opportunity. While culturally familiar relationships offered emotional safety and understanding, forming connections with domestic peers often required more emotional labour, self-disclosure, and cultural navigation. These reflections suggest that international students' social experiences are influenced by their engagement with cultural norms and social expectations. As Matt, Zara, and Lina illustrate, socialization includes learning how to participate in new ways of thinking, relating, and belonging.

These interactions also influence students' evolving identities. As Norton (2013) argues, language learners invest in particular social relationships because they are tied to the identities they seek to construct. For many participants, connections with peers who shared cultural or linguistic backgrounds provided emotional safety and a sense of continuity during a time of profound change. In contrast, engaging with domestic peers often required explaining one's background, bridging cultural gaps, and negotiating feelings of difference. While potentially enriching, these encounters could also be emotionally taxing.

Thus, the social integration patterns described by participants are not merely responses to their environment but also sites of identity negotiation. They reflect students' efforts to position themselves, use language meaningfully, and seek recognition and understanding within a new social context.

Strategic communication and daily adaptation

Participants frequently described using strategies to navigate unfamiliar situations in their new environment. Much of their adaptation occurred informally through peer support, digital tools,

structured activities, and self-initiated engagement with U.S. life. These strategies reflected their agency and were central to developing both language proficiency and social confidence.

Amir, for instance, pointed out how important it was to have someone knowledgeable to consult when encountering unfamiliar aspects of U.S. culture:

> Whenever I have a problem, I reach out to one of my friends. He's very helpful. He's the first person that I reached. He's more experienced, and he has a deeper understanding of American culture. I love to explore, but I just ask him the basic things as a starting point. (Amir)

Amir's experience shows how informal social networks serve as valuable resources for cultural adaptation. Rather than approaching unfamiliar situations on his own, he turns to a trusted friend with more experience who can offer guidance on daily norms. By starting with 'the basic things,' Amir demonstrates an intentional approach to learning: taking small, manageable steps that help him build understanding without becoming overwhelmed. This is a reflection of how relationships can be formed not only for emotional support but as practical tools for navigating cultural and communicative challenges.

Zara described immersion as a key adaptation strategy. She sought out opportunities to observe and engage with others to better understand social expectations:

> I would say you adapt to life here by immersing yourself in the culture and the community and spending as much time as you can. So, in the beginning, if there are any events for international students, I would go to those to talk to people and try to figure out what the social situation here looks like, or if there was anything off campus that was for students, I would go there. (Zara)

Zara's adaptation strategy emphasised active participation in diverse settings. Attending events on and off campus allowed her to observe, interact, and interpret local norms and behaviour. Her goal of figuring out 'what the social situation looks like' highlights how cultural learning involves decoding subtle social cues and expectations, not just mastering language. Similarly, Lina shared how both social connections and organised support helped her navigate life in a new country:

> I just joined a program that helps you to adjust to life here. One of my friends recommended this to me. I think it's helpful for me and for my English too! Also, in ESL [program], Friday's Enrichments [cultural and social activities] were very helpful. (Lina)

Lina's experience shows how formal programmes and informal peer networks complement each other in supporting adaptation. Following a friend's recommendation, she joined a support programme that helped her gain both linguistic and cultural familiarity. Her appreciation for the ESL programme's cultural and social activities points to the value of low-pressure spaces that integrate language practice with social engagement.

Matt described how he manages daily communication challenges using digital tools as an immediate solution and relying on more experienced peers for more complex issues:

> When I am dining out with my friends, sometimes I don't know what the food on the menu means. So, I will just use my mobile for maybe a machine translation app to scan and translate the menu for me, so I will know what's in that dish, so that can help. And if I have difficulty with something, or I don't know something, I will just search online to find the solution myself or ask a close friend who has similar experience to help me. (Matt)

Matt's experience demonstrates how routine situations, like ordering food, become sites of language learning and strategic adaptation. Rather than seeing language gaps as barriers, he responds with immediate, practical solutions: translation apps, internet searches, and peer consultation. His reliance on friends with 'similar experience' also underscores how peers offer valuable support for informal learning and confidence building. These small but intentional acts of adaptation help build not only linguistic competence but also a sense of independence and belonging. Digital tools thus functioned not merely as translation aids but as mediational resources that enabled participants to sustain participation in unfamiliar sociocultural settings.

Collectively, the experiences shared by participants show how language development is deeply embedded in social practice as emphasised in the language socialization framework. Participants' communicative growth took place in everyday interactions, decisions, and problem-solving, rather than occurring solely in classrooms or through structured instruction. These interactions offered access to new discourses, cultural routines, and unspoken social norms, all of which are essential components of what Ochs and Schieffelin (2012) describe as the co-construction of language and culture. Whether it was Amir's reliance on a culturally knowledgeable peer, Zara's efforts to immerse herself in unfamiliar settings, Lina's participation in structured support programmes, or Matt's use of technology and peer support, each example demonstrates that socialization is aided through use of strategies to facilitate participation in the new community and cultural context.

For many participants, these strategies were also tied to shifts in identity. As students used language to access new communities and perspectives, they simultaneously adopted new roles and redefined their sense of self. Zara's decision to immerse herself in unfamiliar settings, for example, illustrates how language was used to navigate complexity and build confidence, reshaping how she viewed her place in both home and host cultures. In this sense, everyday communicative acts were not just tools for getting by; they were spaces where learners negotiated who they were, who they were becoming, and how they wished to be seen. Strategic communication, then, is not only about solving problems. It is a process through which learners adapt, learn, and construct identities within evolving cultural and linguistic landscapes.

Discussion

This study explored how international students in U.S. higher education experience language socialization and how this process guides identity shifts. The findings show that language socialization is multifaceted. It is influenced by individual agency, linguistic challenges, social positioning, and institutional dynamics. Students' language development was deeply tied to emotional engagement, cultural negotiation, and the desire for legitimacy within academic and social spheres.

Participants described persistent difficulties with informal English, especially in spontaneous or culturally nuanced situations. Matt and Lina's discomfort in daily interactions is consistent with findings by Boz, Barrantes, and Tweedie (2018), who observed that even proficient students may struggle with pragmatic competence in unstructured communication. While Boz, Barrantes, and Tweedie (2018) focus primarily on classroom-based sociolinguistic competence, the present findings show that similar vulnerabilities persist in informal, everyday interactions, suggesting that pragmatic challenges extend beyond structured academic contexts. Zara's difficulty with metaphorical or indirect language highlights the importance of shared cultural knowledge, as emphasised by Fei (2016) and Ochs and Schieffelin (2012). These findings suggest that linguistic accuracy alone is not enough for communicative success. Effective participation also requires an understanding of implicit social expectations and norms (Ou and Gu 2021). In this institutional context, these expectations often include rapid turn-taking, informal register shifts, culturally embedded humour, and expectations of confident self-expression. For participants accustomed to different communicative norms, navigating these interactional expectations required not only linguistic adjustment but recalibration of how competence and legitimacy are displayed.

The emotional weight of these experiences was also significant. Lina's self-doubt, Zara's hesitation, and Matt's anxiety reflect how learners often compare themselves to L1 speakers and internalise idealised norms. This echoes the work of Clément and Norton (2021) and Norton (2013), who argue that language learners' self-perceptions are influenced by how they position themselves and how they are positioned by others within social and linguistic hierarchies. When listeners are impatient or dismissive, learners may disengage, reinforcing a sense of inadequacy.

Despite these challenges, participants reported meaningful identity changes over time. Zara's reflections on gender and her sense of being culturally in-between illustrate how transnational experiences can prompt critical reflection and transformation. Amir's increased patience and

Sara's growing confidence suggest that identity shifts may be behavioural, emotional, or cognitive. These findings align with research by Soltani, Tran, and Reza (2022), Plews (2015), and Tavares (2021), who describe identity development as reconstructive. However, unlike studies that see identity reconstruction as mostly a cumulative or immersion-based process, these findings reveal varied paths of identity change, even among students pursuing long-term degrees within the same institution. Students are not simply adding new cultural practices; they are reshaping their sense of self and their relationships with others.

Importantly, the findings indicate that this process of reshaping occurred via multiple pathways instead of a single adaptation model. Some participants reevaluated cultural values critically, others adjusted their interpersonal behaviours, and some gradually built confidence. This diversity challenges simple linear models of acculturation and highlights the social influences involved in identity development during long-term degree studies.

Peer networks played a complex role in these processes. Participants often relied on co-national or regional peers for emotional and practical support. These relationships provided safety and familiarity during the early stages of adjustment, reflecting findings of Paradowski, Jarynowski, and Czopek (2022), Trice (2004), and Zhou and Rose (2023). While Zhou and Rose (2023) discuss relatively stable social clustering based on L1, participants in this study showed more ambivalent and fluid views toward co-national networks, acknowledging their emotional significance as well as possible drawbacks. At the same time, such networks could limit engagement with host language users and reduce access to local discourse practices. Isabelli-García et al. (2018) and Sauer and Ellis (2019) similarly noted that while peer support can be a vital coping strategy, it may restrict broader language and cultural development.

Most participants did not interpret limited interaction with domestic students as rejection. Instead, they pointed to structural and social factors. Matt and Lina described how domestic students often arrived with established friendships and local ties, making it difficult for newcomers to integrate. Zara spoke about the initial distance that can arise when cultural backgrounds differ. These experiences reflect insights from Kaya (2020) and Gomes and Tran (2017), who emphasise how international students may feel peripheral to campus life, not because of overt exclusion but because of existing social dynamics. Within large public universities in the U.S., where domestic students typically have established regional and social ties, integration is often influenced more by institutional social structures than by explicit exclusion. These particular contextual factors clarify why students saw limited interaction not as rejection but as a form of social distance embedded in institutional routines.

Despite these constraints, participants demonstrated active adaptation using strategies. Zara attended social events to better understand local expectations. Amir sought advice from a knowledgeable peer. Lina engaged with structured support programmes. Matt used translation apps and digital searches to solve real-time communication problems. These strategies reflect what Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015) describe as individualised networks of practice. These findings align with Ochs and Schieffelin (2012), who view language learning as embedded in social practice and formed through interactions with people, institutions, and routines in specific contexts.

Participants' communication strategies also contributed to their evolving identities. Zara's deliberate immersion, Amir's reflective interaction style, and Sara's growing sense of capability all illustrate how language use helps shape how individuals see themselves and how they wish to be seen. These actions were not only functional; they were deeply personal. As Norton (2013) explains, learners invest in language practices that align with their desired identities and social futures.

In summary, this study shows that language socialization and identity development are closely intertwined. For international students, learning a language in a new academic and cultural setting involves more than mastering grammar or vocabulary. It means engaging with unfamiliar discourses, navigating social dynamics, and constructing new understandings of self. Identity shifts emerge not only through language learning, but through participation in new communities, reflection on personal values, and the emotional labour of cross-cultural adjustment.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the small sample size limits the transferability of findings. Participants were relatively proficient English users. This was intentional, as the study required individuals who could articulate complex emotional experiences and reflect on identity and socialization. However, this may not reflect the experiences of students facing more substantial linguistic barriers.

Although participants had high English proficiency, conducting interviews in English may have constrained their ability to fully express deeply personal or culturally embedded meanings. Future research could benefit from multilingual or first-language data collection to allow for greater cultural specificity and emotional nuance.

Additionally, this study relied on a single interview with each participant, offering only a snapshot of their experiences. Longitudinal research could better capture how language socialization and identity shift unfold over time. Studies that include classroom observations, peer interaction analysis, or social network mapping, as in Paradowski, Jarynowski, and Czopek (2022) and Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015), could offer a more comprehensive view of international students' learning processes, social positioning, and identity development across different contexts.

Implications

Although this study was situated at one U.S. institution, the challenges and experiences of multilingual international students described here are not uncommon across many English-medium higher-education contexts. The following recommendations are grounded in this study's specific setting in the U.S., but we believe they may nonetheless be relevant to internationalised universities more broadly.

This study highlights the need for institutions to move beyond deficit-oriented views of international students and adopt a more holistic understanding of their language development and identity trajectories. Participants' narratives underscore that linguistic competence is not simply about grammatical accuracy. It includes sociocultural knowledge, confidence, emotional safety, and a sense of belonging. These findings suggest several directions for institutional support.

First, orientation programmes and language services should address not only academic writing and speaking but also the informal, context-sensitive communication challenges students encounter in daily life. Participants reported that phone calls, spontaneous conversations, and culturally embedded language posed more difficulty than classroom discourse. Workshops focused on pragmatics, idiomatic language, register variation, and strategies for navigating unstructured interactions could help reduce communicative anxiety and strengthen confidence. The experiences of Sara and Lina suggest that structured, low-pressure interactional spaces may be especially valuable. Programmes that facilitate reciprocal dialogue between domestic and international students, rather than placing the burden of adaptation solely on international students, may foster more confident participation in both social and academic settings.

Second, peer mentoring and community-building initiatives can play a critical role in students' adaptation. Participants benefited from informal guidance, culturally responsive programmes, and low-stakes environments for interaction. Institutions could develop structured peer-mentorship models and facilitate intercultural discussion spaces that encourage sustained, reciprocal engagement across cultural and linguistic boundaries, consistent with Marangell and D'Orazzi's (2023) findings on the role of institutional structures in highly internationalised universities.

Third, faculty and staff development should include attention to sociolinguistic realities in English-dominant institutions. This may involve raising awareness of accent diversity, pragmatic norms, classroom participation expectations, and how legitimacy is negotiated through interaction. Greater awareness can help create classroom environments where students are recognised as legitimate participants regardless of linguistic style.

Finally, institutions must recognise the emotional labour of cultural adaptation. For many students, identity development involved not only growth but also disorientation, loss, and uncertainty. Supporting student well-being and cultural adjustment alongside academic development must be a priority within broader efforts to foster inclusion and equity in higher education.

Conclusion

This study explored how international students in U.S. higher education navigate language socialization and how these processes contribute to identity transformation. Through in-depth interviews, participants described the emotional, linguistic, and social dimensions of their academic journeys. Their narratives show that language learning extended far beyond vocabulary and grammar. It involved learning how to participate, be recognised, and belong within unfamiliar social and institutional contexts.

The findings highlight that identity development is a gradual and nonlinear process influenced by interaction, reflection, and emotional engagement. Participants' identities shifted as they engaged with new norms, adopted new communicative practices, and reconsidered prior values across classroom settings, peer relationships, institutional spaces, and daily encounters. In this study, these shifts were shaped by context-specific features of U.S. higher education, including informal communicative norms that demanded quick interpretation in unstructured interactions, peer networks that were often socially established before students arrived, and institutional expectations around participation and confidence in self-expression. Within these conditions, language socialization was not only about learning to use English effectively, but also about learning how legitimacy is negotiated through participation and positioning in interaction (Morita 2004; Norton 2013).

As institutions continue to welcome international students, there is a growing need to support not only their academic success but also their cultural integration and identity development. Creating inclusive spaces, validating diverse experiences, and fostering a sense of belonging can reduce the social distance that students often describe and expand opportunities for meaningful engagement. Attending to the everyday communicative demands of campus life, alongside academic expectations, can help institutions better support international students as they build confidence, develop relationships, and navigate evolving senses of self.

While this study offers insight into how international students experience identity shift through language socialization in U.S. higher education, it also points to several directions for future research. First, extending this analysis to different institutional contexts, such as community colleges, professional programmes, or institutions with varying levels of linguistic diversity, could illuminate how institutional structures shape opportunities for participation and identity development. Second, research with larger and more diverse participant groups would allow for comparative analyses across linguistic, disciplinary, and sociocultural backgrounds, helping to further refine understandings of identity shift in multilingual higher education. Finally, longitudinal studies following students over longer periods of academic engagement could provide deeper insight into how identity trajectories evolve over time, including how earlier experiences of socialization influence later participation, confidence, and sense of belonging. Such work would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of identity development as an ongoing and context-dependent process.

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