

Inventing an Academic Translingual/Transcultural Safe Space for International Graduate Students: Our Personal Journey

DaYeon Kwon¹ & David Schwarzer²

¹ Department of Counseling, Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA

² Teaching and Learning, Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA

Correspondence: DaYeon Kwon, Department of Counseling, Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA

Received: December 21, 2022

Accepted: February 23, 2023

Online Published: February 25, 2023

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v12n1p96

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v12n1p96>

Abstract

This article provides a description and reflection of the development of the foundational course for international graduate students in a public university in the Northeast USA. The course was developed in an attempt to provide support and guidance for practitioners and researchers who work closely with international graduate students through transcultural/translingual and whole-person approaches. Our proposed foundation course better prepares international graduate students for academic success in their first term. Recommendations for creating the first-term foundation course for international graduate students are posed at the end of this article.

Keywords: Foundation course, International graduate students, International students, Transcultural/translingual, Academic success

1. Introduction

The article is the final part of the authors' year-long journey to create, implement, and reflect on a new class developed in their large public university in the Northeast USA. This article has three distinct purposes: (1) to review the literature to describe best practices for curriculum development for classes geared towards international graduate students in the USA; (2) to describe the development of a newly created class in a public university in the NYC metropolitan area; and (3) to reflect on the creation, implementation, and insights gained from the class (implications for practitioners will be provided). International students contribute to American institutions' diversity, research, teaching (Deuchar, 2022), economic benefits, and cross-cultural communication skills (Shane et al., 2020). However, most university resources have been geared toward American students, putting aside international graduate students' needs (Yan, 2020). The current article will provide the guideline for developing a foundation course for international graduate students to successfully navigate their academic journeys in the USA in their first term. To maximize the learning of international graduate students, the authors will provide a literature review, describe and reflect on the development of the class, and propose implications for future practices.

1.1 Literature Review

In this section, the authors will review the literature to describe best practices for curriculum development for classes geared toward international graduate students in the USA. While reviewing the literature, several issues became apparent – first, most of the literature reviewed looks at the experiences of international students as “deficient,” or “lacking” instead of focusing on international students' strengths. Moreover, language and culture are seldom mentioned – if mentioned – they try to “fix” students' language and cultures. Our approach to language and culture was quite more nuance – we used a translingual/transcultural approach to embrace their cultural and linguistic identities.

1.1.1 Deficit Views

Scholars addressed that international graduate students have language difficulties that limit their ability to engage and participate in classes and have negatively impacted the quality of assignments, presentations, and class participation (Aizawa et al., 2020). Most American universities require English language proficiency tests prior to their admissions for gatekeeping purposes. Although most international graduate students meet their language proficiency requirements, many studies have claimed that they still experience language problems in academic settings, recommending that students take English as Second Language (ESL) programs to “fix” their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Although previous studies addressed language as a critical factor that has negatively impacted international graduate

students' academic outcomes, the academic success of international students is multidimensional (Kuncel et al., 2001).

We acknowledge international graduate students' academic competencies and aim to pose a strength-oriented view to support their academic journeys in the United States. Strength and holistic approaches allow practitioners to move away from presuming that limited English proficiency restricts their academic experiences and move toward treating them as capable and independent academic scholars. With such beliefs, we created a Foundation of Transcultural/Translingual Education course for international graduate students to support their academic journey.

1.2 Key Terms

Several terms had been used interchangeably in the past to address culture and language in diverse settings. This section will define the several terms that are used by scholars and provide our rationale for intentionally choosing the terms transcultural/translingual for our course title.

1.2.1 Bilingualism/Biculturalism and Multilingualism/Multiculturalism

Although some people have used biculturalism/bilingualism, multilingualism/multiculturalism, or interculturalism indistinguishably when describing an individual's exposure to multiple languages and cultures, we tried to distinguish each term and aimed to intentionally use translingualism/transculturalism for the purpose to describe the intersectionality and fluidity of international graduate students' identities, languages, and cultures.

Biculturalism/bilingualism refers to fluency in languages and comfort in cultures of both one's national origin and the country they settled in (Cedeno & Schwarzer, 2022). As biculturalism/bilingualism does not embrace ethnic minorities, some scholars used multiculturalism/multilingualism to empower ethnic minorities and their culture/language use (Alzahrani, 2019). Multiculturalism/multilingualism refers to a constellation of different cultures/languages where individuals strive to maintain their multiple identities and become a part of the mainstream community (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019). Furthermore, interculturalism (instead of multiculturalism) has gained popularity in Europe to address the increasing challenges created by the heterogeneity of the populations. The term refers to having interpersonal relations with more than two cultures to promote social harmony among diverse cultures (Alzahrani, 2019; Levrau & Loobuyck, 2018). Both multiculturalism and interculturalism fall in the essentialist view of culture. According to the essentialist view, cultures, languages, and identities are static rather than fluid and geographically bounded (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019). Such an approach neglects the historical contexts of minoritized populations and their power relations with other cultural groups, expects them to fit into the mainstream culture, demands shifts within their identities to meet social expectations, and views individuals as problematic and limiting (Alzahrani, 2019). Therefore, we intentionally refrain from using these terms and, instead, choose to use translingualism/transculturalism.

1.2.2 Translingualism/transculturalism

Transculturalism, instead, refers to situating oneself within the borders of multi-ethnic states as individuals borrow, blend, return, and reuse values and practices from diverse cultures to reconstruct their identity and social belongings (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019; Cedeno & Schwarzer, 2022). Schwarzer et al. (2009) defined translingualism as the "development of several languages and literacies in a dynamic and fluid way across the lifespan, while moving back and forth between real and imagined borders and transacting with different cultural identities within a unified self" (p. 210). In other words, translingualism and transculturalism moved away from essentialist and static perspectives, allowing individuals to interweave all cultural and linguistic identities in a more fluid way to more fully understand the phenomenon at hand (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019).

We have purposefully chosen to use the terms transculturalism and translingualism to acknowledge that international graduate students have the full potential to achieve academic success while navigating their multiple identities and cultures within the unified self. Furthermore, we have intentionally moved away from using the terms *transition* and *adjustment*, as it could deliver the message that international graduate students lack academic competencies and do more to meet educational needs in the United States.

In conclusion, it is clear that most studies addressed international graduate students with a deficit view – what they lack. However, our proposed class created a foundation course with a translingual/transcultural approach to acknowledge international students' strengths while developing skills that the international students might lack but still believing that they have the full potential to successfully navigate the U.S. academic arena.

2. Description of the Class

In this section, the authors will describe the development of a newly created class in a public university in the NYC metropolitan area. It will include a description of the class and its context, moving from “admissions” to “academic affairs.”

The course that we are discussing here is called: Foundations of Transcultural/Translingual Education. The course was initially designed and developed as part of a "regular" bilingual minor in Educational Foundations at a large 4-year public institution in the Northeast of the United States. The authors adapted this class that was on the books for the special needs of new incoming graduate international students. The translingual/transcultural class was part of the offerings of the Educational Foundations department at the university. It was developed with a sophisticated and cutting-edge understanding of language and culture in multilingual/multicultural situations. Therefore, using this class as the basis for the experience instead of going through the rigorous and lengthy process to develop a new class was preferred. Of course, major changes in the scope and content of the class were made.

It was the first time that the university specifically designed a course for international graduate students to promote success in and outside the graduate-level programs during their first semester at the institution. All incoming international graduate students were invited to enroll in the 0-3 credit course. International graduate students could attend the course without paying an extra cost. The objectives of the course include but are not limited to the following.

- Facilitate the process of international graduate students' adjustment to a new social and academic life in the United States in general and graduate education in particular.
- Provide a safe space to make the successful transition from a different country's academic culture to the American academic culture.
- Provide a supportive and safe environment where sharing experiences, asking questions, and discussing problems are commonplace.

2.1 A shift from Admissions to Academic Affairs

Most orientation programs for international graduate students are organized and hosted by the Admissions Department and the office of International Students. Such departments provide information on and manage visa- and immigration-related issues and university resources but do not focus much on academic skills.

Distinctively, our translingual/transcultural course was designed and implemented by the Department of Academic Affairs in collaboration with the Office of International Students. While the course was planned and taught by academic professors focusing solely on the academic needs of international graduate students and helping them become more capable and independent academic scholars, the staff from the Office of International Students joined several times to address some of the logistical issues (e.g., registration, F-1 status) of international graduate students. In previous years, each department stood for themselves, and students were responsible for navigating the issues by working with each department. Uniquely, our program created a community for international graduate students to receive holistic support through the collaboration of the Department of Academic Affairs and the Office of International Students.

3. Reflection

In the following section, the authors will reflect on the insights gained from the development of the curriculum for the class. Three major themes became crucial aspects of the reflection: the type of curriculum development (predetermined versus negotiated – chronological versus frontloaded based on an assessment), the structure of the experience, and creating a safe space.

3.1 Predetermined vs. Negotiated Topics

The course was designed to have predetermined topics, whereas some of the weeks had "empty" topics to be negotiated with the students (see appendix A for the schedule of classes). The predetermined topics were selected based on what we anticipated to be students' chronological needs such as reviewing the syllabi, writing a literature review, and citing resources.

Along with the predetermined topics, we negotiated half of the curriculum to address students' personalized needs and wants. For negotiated topics, we encouraged students to bring in topics tailored to their personal and professional academic needs, interests, and wants (i.e. personal assignments such as final projects, presentations, term papers, and writing for publication). Furthermore, we conducted a midterm evaluation to assess students' academic skills (See

Appendix B for the full midterm evaluation). Based on its results, we added a couple more modules to the existing list (i.e. managing reference software, and preparing presentations).

We noticed that students were in different developmental stages throughout the course based on the midterm survey. For example on technology, some students had knowledge of downloading software from the university's website and using the library database, while others had challenges doing a Boolean google scholar search. Instructors differentiated instruction to support their needs as part of the class.

Therefore, we suggest having 2 to 3 pre-semester "frontloading" seminars to address these differences. In those seminars, the instructor expects some common issues that students might face in their academic journeys and teaches those skills in advance. Frontloading would allow students to prepare for taking courses and close the gap for underprivileged students. For example, some students might not be required to write a literature review in their first term and might not clearly understand what a literature review is. By teaching specific academic skills related to the literature review in the transcultural/translingual foundation course, international graduate students would feel much more confident accomplishing it in their later semesters. We would suggest practitioners consider the sequences of and frontloading the contents to best serve international graduate students.

3.2 A Whole-of-person Approach

Like other regular university courses, our course was academic-oriented, and social gathering was not taken into consideration. However, we noticed the centrality of community among international graduate students, as they expressed their desire to connect with other students by inquiring about regular social activities. Therefore, a more explicit whole-person approach that endorses academic, social, and emotional dimensions of students' growth (Tsang et al., 2021) was adopted. By the whole person, we mean that instructors take account of students' social and emotional well-being beyond academic success. Instructors with a whole-of-person approach care for the whole person, give a sense of connection, and cultivate the professional development of students (Tsang et al., 2021). In response to students' desire, we arranged a few events (e.g., grocery shopping and lunch events) for international graduate students in collaboration with the Department of Student Affairs, inviting other international graduate students on campus. It also served as a gimmick to invite other international graduate students to join the community. Moreover, at the beginning of each class, we invited students to check in asking personalized questions related to academic and personal life, where students shared their successes and challenges reflecting their realities. Students reported feeling valid, valued, and connected with each other as they went through similar experiences as international graduate students.

We suggest that practitioners foster a whole-of-person approach when developing the foundation course for international graduate students. It allows instructors to care for students as the whole person, providing them a sense of belonging and connection within the community. Furthermore, we will continue collaborating with the Department of Academic Affairs and invite the Office of International Students to create a community for international graduate students.

3.3 Alternative Format Experience: Flipped Classroom and Weekend Workshops

3.3.1 Flipped Classroom

The master-level 15-week course was designed as a hybrid 0-3 credit class. The flipped classroom instructional strategy was utilized to promote the learning of international graduate students. The flipped classroom strategy allows students to study concepts before the class through pre-recorded lectures or podcasts, freeing up the class for more interactive and collaborative learning (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020). We created modules on Canvas where students had access to course materials in advance of class and were expected to complete each module before they attended the synchronous class. Students would apply their knowledge to discussions and group work facilitated by the instructor in the class. The instructor utilized the class time to interact with students one-on-one and meet their individual academic needs (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020). After each class, students were encouraged to complete the "proof of completion" assignment, which invited students to reflect on the pre-recorded lectures and readings and ask questions about the previous course materials. The course required the use of Canvas, the preferred educational platform for online learning, as well as active monitoring and the use of the institution's email account. The majority of the course documents were communicated via Canvas.

We suggest practitioners utilize the flipped classroom modality to become more effective for both students and instructors. The strategy allows students to bring questions after reviewing pre-recorded lectures and readings; hence, the class is not lecture-based learning, and instructors promote interactive learning where students self-lead and actively engage in the learning process.

3.3.2 Weekend Workshops

We invited international graduate students for three-hour monthly weekend workshops to support their academic needs. Regardless of students' enrollment in the course, all international graduate students on campus were invited to participate in the workshops. In response to students' attendance, doctoral fellows and graduate assistants attended the workshops, paired with international graduate students, and provided feedback on their projects.

Offering workshops for international graduate students might be a useful strategy when designing a foundation course. The open enrollment of the workshops allows international graduate students at different levels of their careers to get individualized support in their academic writing skills through working with doctoral fellows and graduate assistants.

3.4 Safe Environment

We intentionally aimed to create a safe space for international graduate students to move away from judgments and assumptions. Both instructor and co-instructor are former international students in the United States and ethnic minorities. Instructors shared the ideology of strength perspective of international graduate students and shifted from a deficit perspective and used a translingual transcultural approach to teaching and learning. The expectations that international graduate students will do well and make it through their programs allowed students to learn well. Furthermore, the instructors deeply cared for students and provided support for their success. In the first class of the semester, senior staff from the Department of Academic Affairs was invited and set the tone for a safe space by disclosing her experience as a former international student. It fostered an environment where students felt included from the start. Students could come to class and communicate their challenges as international students, free of the fear of being judged for their mistakes. Students reported feeling safe to say 'no' or 'I do not understand', received constructive and critical feedback on their work, and engaged in class discussions without the fear of speaking up.

We propose that practitioners approach international graduate students with a strength-oriented perspective to create a culturally and linguistically safe environment where students and instructors freely express themselves without hurting others or being hurt. As minorities on campus, international graduate students often experience marginalization and discrimination. The classroom serves as a place where students can express themselves fully as a community. We plan to invite scholars who were former international students to set the tone for a safe space. We suggest that practitioners be mindful of creating a culturally and linguistically safe space for international graduate students.

4. Conclusions for Practitioners

Scholars view international graduate students as lacking academic competencies when studying in the United States. Such an approach puts an extra burden on international students, often referring them to take ESL programs or visit the writing centers to fix their English skills. Our proposed foundation course with a translingual/transcultural approach concedes that international students have the full potential to complete their programs as independent scholars, and it aims to support their journeys by coaching the skills based on their needs and creating a community for them in a transcultural and translingual safe space. The tips for higher education curriculum developers are included in Appendix C who aim to create similar classes and programs for international graduate students for their academic success.

References

- Aizawa, I., Rose, H., Thompson, G., & Curle, S. (2020). Beyond the threshold: Exploring English language proficiency, linguistic challenges, and academic language skills of Japanese students in an English medium instruction programme. *Language Teaching Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820965510>
- Akçayır, G., & Akçayır, M. (2018). The flipped classroom: A review of its advantages and challenges. *Computers & Education*, 126, 334-345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.07.021>
- Al-Samarraie, H., Shamsuddin, A., & Alzahrani, A. I. (2020). A flipped classroom model in higher education: a review of the evidence across disciplines. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 68, 1017-1051. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-019-09718-8>
- Cedeno, D. & Schwarzer, D. (2022). Latina faculty developing a bilingual family studies class at a newly designated Hispanic serving institution: "these are safe spaces" *Race ethnicity and Education*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2115090>
- Deuchar, A. (2022). The problem with international students' 'experiences' and the promise of their practices: Reanimating research about international students in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 48(3), 504-518. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3779>

- Kuncel, N. R., Hezlett, S. A., & Ones, D. S. (2001). A comprehensive meta-analysis of the predictive validity of the graduate record examinations: implications for graduate student selection and performance. *Psychological bulletin*, 127(1), 162. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.127.1.162>
- Lee, E., & Canagarajah, S. (2019). The connection between transcultural dispositions and translanguaging practices in academic writing. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 14(1), 14-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2018.1501375>
- Levrau, F., & Loobuyck, P. (2018). Introduction: mapping the multiculturalism-interculturalism debate. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0080-8>
- Schwarzer, D., Petron, M., & Luke, C. (2009). Conclusion. In D. Schwarzer, M. Petron, & C. Luke (Eds.), *Research informing practice — practice informing research: Innovative teaching methodologies for world language teachers*. Information Age Publishing.
- Shane, M. J., Carson, L., & Macri, D. G. (2020). First term support for international graduate students attending small colleges and universities. *Journal of International Students*, 10(2), 527-538. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i2.1126>
- Tsang, A., Yang, M., & Yuan, R. (2021). The relationships between participation in intercultural activities on campus, whole-person development, and academic achievement: a mixed-methods study. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2021.1963121>
- Yan, Z. (2020). Acculturation and well-being among international students: Challenges and opportunities. *Rethinking Education Across Borders: Emerging Issues and Critical Insights on Globally Mobile Students*, 303-315. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2399-1_18

Appendix A
Course Schedule

Week	Activity
Week 1	Formal welcome to the institution
Week 2	Module 1: Understanding American Syllabus
Week 3	Module 2: Personal Communications (emails, office hours, phone conversations)
Week 4	Module 3: Class participation and Reflections on Readings
Week 5	Negotiated Topic
Week 6	Module 4: Working in Small Groups
Week 7	Negotiated Topic
Week 8	Module 5: Writing a Literature Review/Annotated Bibliography
Week 9	Negotiated Topic
Week 10	Module 6: Writing a Research Paper
Week 11	Module 7 & 8: Writing a Reflection Paper & Class Project Paper
Week 12	Negotiated Topic
Week 13	Module 9: Citation References and Software
Week 14	Module 10: Preparing a Presentation
Week 15	Reflection of the Course: Final Presentation

Appendix B**Midterm Evaluation**

Student Name: _____ Advisor's name: _____

1. Have you met your department/academic advisor?

 Yes (How many? ____) Not, but I have scheduled to meet my advisor soon. No, and I have not reached out to them, yet.

2. Do you feel comfortable reaching out (e.g., sending an email or speaking in person) to your professors for additional support?

 Yes No, but I plan to speak to them soon. No, I do not need additional support.

3. How often do you participate in class discussions?

 I actively participate in class discussions and group discussions every week. I feel uncomfortable speaking up in class discussions, but I actively participate in small group discussions. I don't feel comfortable sharing in any kind of groups.

4. How confident are you with your reading skills in English?

 I have learned to read effectively, and I feel confident Reading requires a lot of time, but I understand most of them I spend a lot of time reading articles and textbooks, but I still have challenges understanding them

5. Can you tell the difference between an annotated bibliography and a literature review?

 Yes (please describe the difference in 1-2 sentences) No

6. What do you use to search peer-reviewed articles?

 Google Google Scholar Montclair State University Library PubMed/PsycInfo Other data base

7. How confident are you with the 7 th edition APA format? (Rules about in-text citation, references, direct quotation, indirect quotations)

 I am very familiar with APA 7 th style I am somewhat familiar with APA 7 th style, and I need a little support. I need help with APA 7 th style I do not know what APA/MLA is

8. Do you know how to give an effective presentation using Microsoft PowerPoint or Prezi?

 Yes, I do not need help Yes, but I need some help No, I need your help

9. Do you know what is considered plagiarism in the U.S.?

_____ Yes

_____ No

_____ Not sure

Appendix C

Tips for Higher Education Curriculum Developers

1. Be intentional in posing a transcultural/translingual approach when working with international graduate students.
2. Move away from deficit views, and use a strength-based approach.
3. Collaborate with different departments on campus to create a community for international graduate students.
4. Make the course materials available to all international graduate students whether they are enrolled or not. The course becomes a community for students to support each other academically, socially, and psychologically.
5. Consider the sequences and front load the contents to best serve international graduate students.
6. Foster a whole-of-person approach when developing the foundation course for international graduate students.
7. Utilize the flipped classroom strategy and weekend workshops.
8. Create a transcultural and translingual safe space for international graduate students where they can be fully themselves.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).