Academic Socialization for International Students: Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges of Graduate School

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Meet university expectations...Gain educational success → understand how to think, act, and interact in the classroom and within the broader GSU community.

**Academic socialization** is the process of understanding those culturally-based norms of academia in general and of your graduate program in particular.
Agenda

We’ll explore:

- the meanings of *Communities of Practice* and *Situated Learning* (as understanding can support adjustment as new graduate students)
- the challenges new students often experience related to culture and language
- suggestions for a positive academic experience
- Q&A
**Anecdote: Student “L”**

- Completed his undergraduate / master’s in his home country

- First time out of his home country: new graduate program in an unfamiliar country & in an additional language

- English skills were very good (not referred to academic English support courses; enrolled in graduate writing course)
distraught

struggling

advice!
Professors expect Ss to participate actively in discussions → share/support opinions, comment on classmates’ ideas, ask Qs

Ss earn points for participation, which impacted their course grade

Due to L’s lack of active participation, he was failing a course, even though he had successfully completed all exams and papers
L was struggling with the cultural expectations of his graduate program.

The practice of speaking in class was inconsistent with his former practices.

He was struggling with his identity.

His experiences were inconsistent with his identify and perception of appropriate student behavior.
Other Students’ Experiences

“I wish someone had told me how different my PhD program would be from my master’s program. My first year, I struggled with the course expectations; I struggled with the culture. I felt like a failure that entire year.”
“My professor asks us to critique published articles. How can I critique the ideas of a respected scholar? I feel unqualified. I’ve never published before. I don’t even know the words to politely assess someone’s work in English.”
In their new communities at GSU, these students’ ways of thinking and learning were being challenged. They faced personal questions, such as

- “Who am I in this new context?”
- “How am I supposed to act in this new community?”
- “What do I need to learn to be perceived as competent?”

Communities of Practice

- A group with common interests and common goals, working together

- We learn—consciously or subconsciously— the expectations of our CoPs
  - how to think, act, and interact
  - explicitly taught (“you must attend all lectures” or “please raise your hand to offer a comment”)
  - acquired through observation / gradual participation (the language of polite disagreement, turn-taking patterns)
Situated Learning

- This idea of CoP was first explored in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

  - Learning (developing skills and knowledge) is situated within a community.
  - Newcomers join a community through a process of “legitimate peripheral participation”: in the outer edges—watching and listening.
  - Newcomers gradually interact with more experienced members → gradually acquiring the skills and knowledge of the community.
### Traditional Learning vs. Situated Learning

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Learning</th>
<th>Situated Learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>takes place in out-of-context experiences</td>
<td>takes place through relationships; by connecting knowledge with informal and authentic learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• lectures, books, note-taking, test taking</td>
<td>• problem-based learning</td>
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<td>• case study learning</td>
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<td>• service learning</td>
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<td>• collaborative learning</td>
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<td>• reflections</td>
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Source: https://www.niu.edu/citl/resources/guides/instructional-guide/situated-learning.shtml

**Situated Learning is a social process, not solely in the learner’s head**
Developing a Positive Academic Experience
1. Understand that adapting to a new environment takes time.

- excited & focus on positive aspects of the new experience
- anxious, confused about differences → difficulty sleeping/eating, feeling sad or frustrated, self-doubt / sense of failure

This is normal! This is temporary.
If you are having difficulties, talk about your experiences:

- classmates
- academic advisor
- professors (visit their office hours)
- family

See a counselor at the GSU Counseling Center
2. Get involved in social activities. 
Learn a new sport at the Recreational Center. 
Explore the city. 
Don’t wait for classmates to invite you; you extend the invitation!
3. Remind yourself that situated learning takes place in the relationships with others in the community.

Form study groups of both newcomers and more experienced students.
4. Remind yourself that your ideas and experiences are valuable to the learning of others in the class. You were selected for the knowledge, experiences, and diversity you bring.
5. Develop strategies for actively participating in class.

Ex) “L” started writing Qs or comments about course readings and practiced making those comments or asking those questions prior to his class discussions.
6. Improve your academic English and intercultural skills: enroll in an ESL Graduate course.

- Develop academic English skills
- Learn/practice the genres and tasks of academia
- Build a strong community; feel less isolated and lonely
- Explore US classroom culture; develop strategies for classroom success
7. Get involved in the ~100 student and campus organizations: attend meetings, volunteer, serve in leadership roles
   → Learn how higher ed works; network; develop professional skills
   GSU’s Graduate Alliance, https://graduate.gsu.edu/graduate-alliance/
8. Get involved in your department’s and GSU’s Graduate School events and activities.

→ develop academic & professional skills
9. Get involved in professional organizations (local, national): become a member, volunteer or present at a conference

   learn how to write & present, talk about research, connect classroom learning to the academic community, network
Conclusion and Q&A

With any new life transition, we all experience anxiety and difficulties. Remember to be patient with yourself as you adjust to your new life at GSU:

- Be a careful observer.
- Ask questions.
- Remember your value.
- Push yourself to practice the conventions of the CoP.
- Get involved to understand the social and academic culture.

Enjoy this exciting adventure!
GSU Resources

- Academic English and Cultural Support for Graduate Students: [https://alsl.gsu.edu/support-for-international-graduate-students/](https://alsl.gsu.edu/support-for-international-graduate-students/)
  (see a list of courses on the next slide)
- Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, & Online Education (CETLOE): [https://cetl.gsu.edu/](https://cetl.gsu.edu/)
- Counseling Center & Health and Wellness Newsletter: [https://counselingcenter.gsu.edu/](https://counselingcenter.gsu.edu/)
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Student resources [https://dei.gsu.edu/act/student-organizations/](https://dei.gsu.edu/act/student-organizations/) & Student organizations [https://dei.gsu.edu/act/student-resources/](https://dei.gsu.edu/act/student-resources/)
- Graduate Alliance: [https://graduate.gsu.edu/graduate-alliance/](https://graduate.gsu.edu/graduate-alliance/)
- Grammarly: [https://technology.gsu.edu/technology-services/it-services/training-and-learning-resources/grammarly/](https://technology.gsu.edu/technology-services/it-services/training-and-learning-resources/grammarly/)
- Library: [https://library.gsu.edu/](https://library.gsu.edu/) & Research Guides: [https://research.library.gsu.edu/](https://research.library.gsu.edu/)
- Tutoring Lab / Writing Studio: [https://writingstudio.gsu.edu/](https://writingstudio.gsu.edu/)
Support for International Graduate Students

The ESL for Graduate Students Program offers courses to help Georgia State University international graduate students increase their confidence and understanding of academic English and U.S. academic culture.

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<tr>
<th>Course Code</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Credits</th>
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<tr>
<td>ESL 7100</td>
<td>Building Academic Language</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Expand your academic vocabulary for improved speaking, reading, and writing fluency. Explore the use of online tools to improve your understanding and productive use of general academic vocabulary, phraseology, discipline-specific collocations, and related grammar structures. Complete written and spoken activities to practice and apply this knowledge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESL 7250</td>
<td>Academic Listening &amp; Speaking for Graduate Students</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Develop communication skills needed to give effective academic and professional presentations, actively participate in small talk and discussions, better understand academic lectures, and improve English fluency and pronunciation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESL 7350</td>
<td>Academic Writing for Graduate Students</td>
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<td>Analyze and write academic genres (e.g., data commentary, summaries, critiques), develop research writing skills (paraphrasing, synthesizing, citing), practice the writing process (including developing revision and editing skills), and refine the use of academic vocabulary and grammar.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESL 7400</td>
<td>Reading and Summarizing Research</td>
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<td>Develop critical reading and summarizing skills, focusing on research articles. Apply reading strategies to improve your understanding of academic articles, write summaries and critiques, and compile an annotated bibliography or literature review of articles from your field.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESL 7500</td>
<td>Teaching at the University for International GTAs</td>
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<td>Gain valuable classroom language and intercultural skills, complete microteaching sessions on topics in your discipline, and analyze the teaching of undergraduate courses. ESL 7250 is a prerequisite if GSTEP recommended.</td>
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Resources

Questions?