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Linguistic Capital, Phonological Dissonance, and International Student Adaptation: An Analytic Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT: *Movement between intra-English contexts can produce significant cognitive and psychological disruption. Research on international student adaptation has extensively examined language proficiency, sociocultural adjustment, and academic integration, yet an underexplored dimension is phonological transition across national varieties of English even among formally fluent speakers. This analytic autoethnography examines the transition from a British English-based educational background to American doctoral study, tracing the cognitive, affective, and identity-related consequences of phonological dissonance. The study conceptualizes phonological adaptation as a matter of epistemic access and symbolic legitimacy. Seven themes emerged: illusion of fluency, phonological shock, listening fatigue, participation hesitation, micro-interactional confidence erosion, accent negotiation, and time as adaptation capital. Findings position phonological decoding as structural to academic integration and offer implications for pre-arrival preparation, institutional practice, and faculty awareness.*

Keywords: Accent adaptation, Belonging, Cognitive load, International students, Linguistic capital, Phonological dissonance

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility has reached unprecedented scale. According to the Institute of International Education (2023), more than 5.3 million students were studying outside their home countries globally, with the United States hosting over one million international students in 2022–2023. Within this mobility, language is consistently identified as among the most significant barriers to academic and social adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Schartner & Young, 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Research has documented challenges related to academic writing conventions, oral participation in class, peer communication, and standardized testing (Gautam et al., 2016; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

For the purposes of this study, an international student is defined as a student who crosses national borders for the purpose of enrolling in a degree-granting academic program in a host country where they are not a citizen or permanent resident (OECD, 2022). This definition situates the present analysis within the broader global mobility literature and clarifies the structural context in which intra-English phonological transitions occur.

What this literature has not sufficiently examined, however, is a challenge specific to a growing segment of internationally mobile students: those who are formally fluent in English but who transition between national varieties of the language. For students educated in British English contexts who then enter American academic environments, the transition is not from non-English to English. It is from one standardized phonological system to another. This intra-English boundary crossing has received comparatively little scholarly attention, despite its meaningful consequences for cognitive load, academic participation, and identity.

This paper addresses that gap through an analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) of the author's transition from a British English-based African educational system to an American doctoral program. Throughout the educational trajectory preceding doctoral study, English was the language of instruction across secondary school, advanced-level examinations, undergraduate study, and in-country postgraduate coursework. English proficiency was not in question. What was unanticipated was that English, the shared language, was not uniformly the same language across all contexts.

The differences encountered were phonological: shifts in vowel articulation, word stress patterns, speech rhythm, and conversational pacing that required continuous decoding effort. Over time, this decoding effort consumed cognitive bandwidth that would otherwise be directed at content. It also generated a suite of social consequences—participation hesitation, micro-interaction-driven confidence erosion, and identity negotiation—that are recognizable within the broader international student literature but have not been theorized within a phonological frame.

The central research question guiding this study is: How does intra-English phonological transition shape international student adaptation, epistemic access, and academic identity? The study's contribution extends adaptation literature by identifying phonological decoding as a structural rather than incidental dimension

of adjustment. It applies cognitive load theory to the domain of accent-related comprehension in ways that have practical implications for institutional design. Lastly, the study introduces the concept of time as adaptation capital—the recognition that phonological adjustment is time-dependent in ways that disadvantage students in shorter academic programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Student Adaptation and Language

The literature on international student adaptation is extensive, and language consistently emerges as a central variable (Andrade, 2006; Gautam et al., 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Schartner and Young (2016) proposed an integrated conceptual model of international student adjustment that positions linguistic competence as foundational, mediating relationships between students' socioeconomic backgrounds, academic preparation, and social integration outcomes. Yeh and Inose (2003) demonstrated that English fluency—or its subjective perception—was among the strongest predictors of social connectedness and acculturative stress among a large sample of international students.

Yet the operationalization of “language competence” in this literature is overwhelmingly oriented toward written and reading proficiency, or toward broad speaking competence as assessed through standardized instruments such as TOEFL or IELTS. Andrade (2006) reviewed adjustment challenges for international students in English-speaking universities and noted that even students who met institutional language thresholds frequently reported comprehension difficulties in authentic academic settings. Lee and Rice (2007) documented how language-related interactions contributed to international students' experiences of discrimination and marginalization, often operating below the threshold of explicit bias.

Trice (2004) found that international graduate students in the United States experienced significant difficulty forming social connections with American peers, with language serving as the primary mediator of this difficulty. Critically, Trice's participants were not characterized as having low English proficiency. The difficulty was relational and communicative in ways that proficiency scores did not capture.

Recent scholarship has moved beyond narrow measures of English proficiency to conceptualize language as a multidimensional component of acculturation and academic adjustment. Studies in the *Journal of International Students* have shown that language-related challenges are intertwined with institutional structures, identity positioning, and support-seeking practices among international doctoral students, rather than reducible to formal proficiency scores. Building on this work, Gao (2026) demonstrates that international doctoral students' language challenges are embedded within institutional structures and patterns of engagement with support services, while Gao and Wesely (2024) frame acculturation as a dynamic, negotiated process in which linguistic

adaptation intersects with social belonging and academic integration. Earlier, Leong (2015) showed that communicative confidence and patterns of friendship formation significantly shape international students' academic experiences, underscoring the relational and psychosocial dimensions of language use in U.S. higher education.

Despite these advances, scholarship has not explicitly theorized phonological transition across English varieties as a structural dimension of adaptation, even in work that documents differentiated language challenges across student groups in U.S. graduate education. The present study extends this conversation by foregrounding accent-based decoding as an interpretive process through which international students navigate intelligibility, legitimacy, and academic identity within linguistically stratified environments.

Within the *Journal of International Students*, recent empirical work has underscored how linguistic confidence, communicative self-efficacy, and perceived legitimacy shape academic engagement and participation among graduate international students. Although these studies do not focus on accent or phonology per se, they reveal how language-related experiences are structurally linked to access, participation, and belonging—precisely the dimensions this analytic autoethnography revisits through a phonological lens.

Accent, Intelligibility, and Listener Perception

Applied linguistics and communication scholarship offers a more granular account of the phonological dimensions of cross-accent interaction. Derwing and Munro's (2015) foundational framework distinguishes between accentedness (the degree to which speech sounds different from a local variety), intelligibility (the degree to which speech is understood), and comprehensibility (the degree to which speech is easy to understand). These dimensions are related but not equivalent: highly accented speech can be fully intelligible, while moderately accented speech can be difficult to comprehend under conditions of high cognitive load or rapid speech rate. This study focuses primarily on intelligibility and comprehensibility rather than accentedness per se because the core empirical problem is not that speech sounds different, but that the effort required to decode it restructures participation, confidence, and access to academic content.

Lippi-Green (2012) documented how standard American English functions ideologically as a norm against which other varieties are measured—including other standardized Englishes. In educational settings, this normativity has material consequences. Rubin (1992) demonstrated in an experimental study that undergraduate listeners attributed lower comprehension scores to a passage when shown a photograph of an Asian face, suggesting that accent perception is heavily influenced by social expectation rather than phonological signal alone. Subtirelu (2015) extended this analysis to contemporary digital contexts, demonstrating that accent-based assessments of teaching competence carried racialized overtones even when the language of evaluation was ostensibly neutral.

Kang and Rubin (2009) introduced the concept of reverse linguistic stereotyping—the process by which listeners' prior expectations about a speaker's

accent shape actual comprehension performance. Their findings have direct implications for the present study: the incoming phonological schema that a British-educated student carries into American academic settings may itself function as a filter that distorts comprehension, generating decoding effort not merely because American English is phonologically different but because it is different in ways not anticipated by the listener's existing schema.

Harding (2012) examined accent and listening assessment in testing contexts, documenting a shared-first-language advantage in comprehension tasks that was independent of general English proficiency. This finding suggests that accent familiarity constitutes a form of cognitive resource with measurable effects on comprehension performance—directly relevant to the classroom experience of the student whose accent background differs from those of the majority.

World Englishes, English as Lingua Franca (ELF), and the Myth of Homogeneity

The sociolinguistic literature on World Englishes (Kachru, 1992) and English as a Lingua Franca (Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011) has long established that English is not phonologically uniform across national contexts. Kachru's (1992) three-circle model distinguishes inner-circle Englishes (varieties in countries where English is a primary language), outer-circle Englishes (varieties in postcolonial contexts where English serves official functions), and expanding-circle Englishes (varieties learned as foreign languages). Students educated in outer-circle English contexts may carry highly developed academic English competence while being systematically unexposed to inner-circle phonological variation.

Jenkins (2000) argued that the phonological features that matter most for mutual intelligibility in international contexts are those relating to core consonant contrasts rather than vowel quality or prosody—precisely the features that distinguish American from British English at the level of rhythm, vowel reduction, and flapping. This phonological literature helps explain why the transition documented in this paper generates decoding difficulty even among highly competent English users: the divergences are not in the features most critical for basic intelligibility but in the features most prominent in rapid conversational speech.

Cognitive Load and Language Processing

Cognitive load theory, originally developed by Sweller (1988) and substantially updated by Sweller et al. (2019), posits that working memory is limited in capacity and that instructional conditions must be designed to manage the total cognitive load imposed on learners. In language processing contexts, cognitive load is generated by multiple sources simultaneously: phonological decoding, lexical access, syntactic parsing, discourse integration, and content reasoning. Under normal conditions of fluent processing, these operations occur in parallel with minimal conscious awareness. Under conditions of phonological unfamiliarity,

however, the decoding stage demands deliberate attention, consuming cognitive capacity that would otherwise be available for higher-order comprehension and reasoning. Psycholinguistic research on accented speech similarly shows that unfamiliar accents increase listening effort and recruit additional cognitive resources even when utterances remain fully intelligible. Experimental work on exposure to nonnative-accented speech demonstrates that adaptation can reduce listening effort over time, but that such adaptation requires sufficient and systematically varied input.

Paas and Sweller (2012) drew on evolutionary accounts of cognitive architecture to argue that working memory limitations are domain-specific: biologically primary knowledge (including language recognition patterns acquired through extensive naturalistic exposure) is processed with minimal conscious effort, while biologically secondary knowledge (including the phonological schemas of an unfamiliar accent variety) requires deliberate cognitive effort. This distinction maps directly onto the experience of intra-English phonological transition: the British-educated student processing American English is, in cognitive terms, processing a partially familiar but not fully automatic phonological system. Studies of adaptation to unfamiliar accents reinforce this distinction by showing that listeners initially treat novel phonological patterns as effortful secondary knowledge and gradually recategorize them as automatized through repeated exposure.

Identity, Belonging, and Academic Confidence

International student belonging research consistently identifies social connection and sense of acceptance as preconditions for academic engagement and performance (Glass et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). Glass et al. (2017) documented how faculty interactions mediated international students' access to co-curricular opportunities and community networks in ways that amplified initial social disadvantages. Strayhorn (2018) situated belonging as a fundamental psychological need that, when unmet, directly impairs motivational orientation and academic investment.

Darvin and Norton (2015) and Norton (2013) have theorized the relationship between language, identity, and investment in second language acquisition contexts. Their investment framework posits that language learners are not simply acquiring a communication tool but are negotiating identities across multiple social fields. The decision to modify one's accent—or to resist modification—is therefore not merely a pragmatic adjustment to intelligibility demands but a negotiation of selfhood. Lee and Rice (2007) found that international students in American universities experienced what they termed neo-racism: discrimination and marginalization that operated through cultural and linguistic markers rather than overt racial categories. Accent-related micro-interactions fit within this framework as forms of linguistic othering that may occur without conscious bias on the part of the interlocutor.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Linguistic Capital and Phonological Legitimacy

Bourdieu (1991) theorized linguistic capital as the socially valued form of language within a given field—the particular accent, register, vocabulary, and interactional style that accrues recognition and symbolic legitimacy within a specific social space. Within American academia, American English pronunciation occupies the position of legitimate language: the unmarked, normative standard against which other phonological varieties are measured. This framing extends the analysis beyond a technical account of phonological processing to a structural account of access. If accent functions as a dimension of linguistic capital, then the student whose accent diverges from the local legitimate form is not merely managing a communicative inconvenience—they are navigating a symbolic economy in which their linguistic currency is discounted.

Cognitive Load and Phonological Decoding

Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988; Sweller et al., 2019) provides the cognitive mechanism through which phonological dissonance operates. The theory distinguishes between intrinsic load (complexity inherent in the material), extraneous load (unnecessary cognitive burden introduced by presentation conditions), and germane load (cognitive effort directed at schema formation). In the context of phonological dissonance, the decoding of unfamiliar speech patterns constitutes an additional extraneous load—cognitive effort directed not at content but at recognizing the form in which content is delivered.

Phonological dissonance, as operationalized in this study, refers to the sustained mismatch between the listener’s internalized phonological schema and the phonological patterns encountered in ambient speech. Examples documented in this paper include vowel flapping (where intervocalic /t/ is realized as a tap, producing “wadder” for water and “bedder” for better), consonant assimilation patterns, reduced syllable articulation, and the prosodic rhythm of American conversational speech. These features diverge systematically from the British English phonological system in which the author was educated, generating continuous micro-adjustments that accumulate into measurable cognitive fatigue.

The Halo Effect and Confidence Erosion

Thorndike (1920) identified the halo effect—the tendency for a single salient characteristic to influence global evaluations of a person. In applied settings, the halo effect operates in accent perception when phonological divergence from a local norm generates assumptions about broader cognitive or linguistic competence. Even when these assumptions remain implicit and unspoken, their anticipation can generate a form of performance anxiety that Steele and Aronson (1995) identified as stereotype threat: the fear that one’s performance will confirm a negative stereotype, leading to cognitive interference that impairs the

performance it fears. The present study does not claim that interlocutors explicitly applied negative halo effects. Rather, the claim is that the anticipation of phonological divergence—the self-monitoring it generated—was itself a source of academic confidence erosion.

In summary, these frameworks operate in dialogue rather than in isolation. Bourdieu's linguistic capital perspective foregrounds how particular phonological forms are valued within academic fields (Bourdieu, 1991); cognitive load theory specifies the cognitive mechanisms through which unfamiliar phonology diverts processing resources (Paas & Sweller, 2012); and accent intelligibility research clarifies when and how accent differences become effortful or consequential for comprehension (Van Engen & Peelle, 2014). The analytic autoethnography that follows draws on all three simultaneously to conceptualize phonological dissonance as both a cognitive burden and a symbolic positioning within U.S. higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Analytic Autoethnographic Design

This study employs analytic autoethnography as developed by Anderson (2006), distinguishing it from evocative or confessional autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011) by its commitment to theoretical contribution and reflexive positioning. Analytic autoethnography uses the researcher's personal experience as primary data not to tell a story for its own sake but to illuminate social and cultural processes through the lived particularity of that story. The researcher is positioned not as a unique individual but as an exemplar of a broader social type—in this case, the formally fluent international student navigating intra-English phonological transition.

The choice of autoethnography is substantively motivated by the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Phonological dissonance generates experiences—listening fatigue, internal decoding effort, micro-level confidence erosion—that are affective, momentary, and only partially accessible through retrospective interview or survey. The autoethnographic method allows these experiences to be examined with the theoretical rigor they deserve while preserving their phenomenological texture.

Epistemologically, analytic autoethnography is deployed here as a form of theory-building rather than as purely experiential narration. Following Anderson (2006), the goal is not to generalize statistically from a single case but to generate analytically transferable insights into how intra-English phonological transitions may structure cognition, participation, and identity for a broader class of international students. Validity, in this sense, rests on theoretical coherence, transparency of method, and readers' ability to recognize the processes described in their own or their students' experiences.

Positionality

The author is an international doctoral student from sub-Saharan Africa with a British English-based educational background, currently enrolled in a doctoral program in the United States. English has been the language of instruction across all formal education, from secondary school through prior postgraduate study. This positionality makes the author a member of a specific but underrepresented group in international student research: students who are formally designated as English-medium speakers but who navigate intra-English phonological boundaries in their host institution.

This positionality generates both analytic proximity—direct access to the experience under investigation—and potential bias, particularly the risk of over-generalizing from individual experience or under-recognizing adaptive resources that other students in similar situations might access more readily.

Data Construction and Analysis

Data consist of structured retrospective accounts from the first two semesters of doctoral enrollment, generated through memory work: a deliberate, theoretically guided process of revisiting past experiences with analytical intent (Chang, 2008). Across four memory-work sessions of approximately 60–90 minutes each, I responded in writing to a series of prompts addressing: comprehension challenges in specific academic settings; emotional responses to comprehension gaps; behavioral adaptations developed in response; and observable changes across time in comprehension, participation, and confidence. Sessions were conducted individually, with contemporaneous notes on contextual details (course format, interlocutors, institutional setting), and all written accounts were compiled into a single corpus for analysis.

The compiled narratives were imported into a word-processing document and subjected to an iterative thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). In the initial coding phase, I read the corpus multiple times and generated line-by-line codes capturing moments of phonological disruption, emotional reaction, coping strategy, and identity positioning. These descriptive codes were then clustered into more analytic categories (for example, “anticipatory self-monitoring,” “temporal lag in comprehension,” “interactional withdrawal”), which were refined across several cycles of re-reading and memo writing. Through this iterative process, seven themes were identified as robust across the retrospective data and as theoretically generative within the conceptual framework. All identifying details of institutions and individuals have been removed or generalized.

To enhance analytic rigor, I maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and memoed regularly about how theoretical commitments (for example, to linguistic capital or cognitive load) were shaping my interpretations. I also engaged in reflexive checks by revisiting earlier codes after later theoretical reading, noting where interpretations shifted and why, and by informally discussing emerging themes with trusted colleagues to test the resonance and plausibility of my claims.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based solely on the author's retrospective analytic autoethnographic reflection and does not involve interaction with human subjects or identifiable participant data. As such, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required under federal guidelines for human subjects research.

FINDINGS

For analytic clarity, the seven themes are organized here under three higher-order categories: cognitive processing, interactional consequences, and identity negotiation. This structure reflects the movement from internal decoding effort, through classroom interactional dynamics, to longer-term identity and temporal considerations.

Cognitive Processing

Theme 1: The Illusion of Fluency

Before arriving, I had no anticipation of a language challenge. I had written and published in English. I had delivered presentations in English. I had taught in English. In the weeks before departure, colleagues asked whether I was nervous about the adjustment, and I was honest: language, I told them, was not going to be the issue. Within the first week, I understood that I had confused literacy with phonological fluency. Reading a text in American English presented no difficulty. Listening to spoken American English at conversational speed, in ambient acoustic conditions, without the redundancy that formal presentation contexts provide, was something significantly different. I was fluent—but in a variety that was not the one I was hearing.

The illusion of fluency reflects a structural gap in how English-medium international students are assessed and prepared. Standardized English proficiency tests primarily measure reading comprehension, writing competence, and controlled speaking and listening tasks. They do not assess familiarity with specific phonological varieties of English. Jenkins (2000) identified this limitation in the context of ELF research: shared-code proficiency does not guarantee shared-system phonological fluency across variety boundaries. Andrade (2006) noted the gap between proficiency test performance and real-world comprehension experiences among internationally mobile students; the present study suggests this gap is particularly acute when the variety shift is intra-English.

Theme 2: Phonological Shock

The first class was disorienting in ways I had not anticipated. The content was manageable—I had done the readings. But the speech I was hearing did not match my internalized templates. Vowels landed in unexpected places. Intervocalic consonants softened in ways I had to consciously parse. Sentence stress patterns shifted meaning in real time. I spent the first hour not processing arguments but

tracking sounds, trying to match what I was hearing to what I expected to hear. The experience was not one of not knowing the language. It was one of knowing the language and still being unable to process it quickly enough. The words were familiar. The arrangements were familiar. The phonology was not—and the phonology arrived first.

Kang and Rubin's (2009) reverse linguistic stereotyping framework helps explain why phonological shock can be acute even when lexical and grammatical competence is high: the listener's prior phonological schema actively filters incoming speech, generating mismatches when actual phonological features diverge from anticipated ones. The features most prominently generating disruption in this vignette—intervocalic flapping, vowel reduction, and stress-based rhythm—are precisely those that Jenkins (2000) identified as non-core features of international intelligibility but that are central to rapid naturalistic American English.

Theme 3: Listening Fatigue

By the third week, I had developed a pattern that I did not initially recognize as a coping strategy: I arrived in class with more detailed notes from the readings than any of my peers. I was compensating for anticipated comprehension gaps with textual redundancy. Three-hour classes produced a particular kind of exhaustion—not intellectual fatigue from engagement with complex ideas, but the low-grade muscular exhaustion of sustained attention. I was working harder to hear than to think. By the final hour, my comprehension had degraded noticeably. Not because I was less capable at the end of the session, but because my decoding resources were depleted.

This theme maps directly onto Sweller et al.'s (2019) cognitive load framework. The extraneous cognitive load generated by phonological decoding consumed working memory capacity that would otherwise be available for intrinsic load: the genuine intellectual engagement with theoretical content that seminars are designed to support. Paas and Sweller (2012) noted that extraneous load is particularly depleting because it competes with germane load without contributing to schema formation. The compensatory strategy of textual over-preparation represents an adaptive response to anticipated extraneous load, consistent with strategies documented among other international students managing comprehension under uncertainty (Gautam et al., 2016).

Interactional Consequences

Theme 4: Participation Hesitation

Doctoral classes are participation-dependent. I knew what participation required. I had thoughts that were, I believed, worth contributing. But the timing of contribution in a fast-moving discussion depends on near-real-time comprehension of what has just been said. Repeatedly, I found myself half a beat behind. By the time my decoding was complete and my response was formed, the

conversation had moved. Asking for repetition was theoretically available as a strategy, but it came with social costs. In the rhythm of class exchange, requesting repetition disrupts the conversational flow and signals—to oneself and to others—that comprehension has failed. I chose silence. Silence felt less exposing than the wrong kind of visibility.

Participation hesitation is among the most academically consequential effects of phonological dissonance because it directly limits the student's ability to perform the core intellectual work of doctoral training. Lee and Rice (2007) documented how international students in American universities frequently reported self-silencing in academic contexts, attributing it to language concerns that operated at the level of confidence rather than competence. Yeh and Inose (2003) found that perceived English fluency—distinct from measured fluency—was a stronger predictor of social connectedness than standardized scores. The participation-assessment nexus identified here reflects a structural inequity: assessment methods that weight oral contribution disadvantage students whose comprehension delay is phonological rather than intellectual.

Theme 5: “Come Again?” and Confidence Erosion Through Micro-Interactions

The phrase “come again?” is, in American interactional convention, a neutral request for repetition. I understood this. But I also experienced its accumulation. By the second month, I had begun to monitor my speech in anticipation of it: adjusting pace, articulating more deliberately, simplifying sentence structures. The monitoring was not prompted by any direct comment about my accent. Nobody said anything unkind. The monitoring was self-generated. What shifted was the internal register of my academic participation. Before arrival, I thought about the quality of my ideas. After eight weeks of accumulated “come again?” interactions, I thought about whether my ideas could be understood before I thought about whether they were worth saying. The concern had moved upstream.

This theme illustrates the mechanism through which micro-interactions generate confidence erosion without requiring explicit bias. Subtirelu (2015) and Lee and Rice (2007) have documented how subtle, repeated linguistic interactions can accumulate into experiences of marginalization even when no individual interaction carries explicit negative intent. The internal shift described—from idea quality to intelligibility—reflects a reorientation of cognitive resources consistent with what Steele and Aronson (1995) termed stereotype threat. Glass et al. (2017) noted that faculty-student interactions were critical mediating factors in international students' sense of institutional belonging; micro-interactions in which accent-related comprehension difficulties surface may function as signals about one's positioning within the academic community even when they are not intended as such.

Identity Negotiation and Time

Theme 6: Accent Modification and Identity Negotiation

By month three, I was watching American English pronunciation tutorials. The decision was pragmatic: if the interface between my phonological output and local decoding capacity was generating friction, reducing that friction seemed rational. But the process of listening to my own speech and adjusting it syllable by syllable produced an unexpected experience—a mild but persistent sense of loss. My accent was not simply a phonological habit. It was also an index of educational history, of national origin, of a set of relationships and institutions that had shaped me. I developed what I came to think of as selective modification: adjusting features that generated comprehension barriers while retaining features that carried identity. Over time, I developed a code-switching capacity across phonological registers that I had not previously had and had not expected to acquire.

The identity tension documented in this vignette is theorized by Darwin and Norton (2015) through the investment framework: accent modification is not simply a phonological decision but an investment decision that involves negotiating between different identity positions and their associated social costs and benefits. Norton's (2013) earlier work demonstrated that language learners' willingness to invest in target-language forms is mediated by whether those forms offer access to valued social goods without requiring the erasure of existing identity. The selective modification strategy described here represents a pragmatic resolution of this tension. Derwing and Munro (2015) noted that pronunciation instruction is most effective when oriented toward intelligibility rather than nativeness—a distinction that maps onto the selective modification strategy, which targets comprehension barriers rather than accent erasure.

Theme 7: Time as Adaptation Capital

Mid-second-semester, comprehension had improved substantially. Decoding became largely automatic. The cognitive effort that phonological processing had demanded at the beginning had receded, and what had previously required conscious attention had become, if not effortless, at least unconscious. Participation had recovered. Confidence had stabilized. Looking back, I calculated what the first semester had cost, and what it had also provided: a semester in which a portion of my cognitive capacity had been directed at phonological adaptation rather than intellectual development. That cost was real. But doctoral study provided the temporal frame within which adaptation could complete. I found myself thinking about classmates who had come for one-semester exchanges, or for intensive summer institutes. They had faced the same phonological environment and would have left before adaptation could occur.

The concept of time as adaptation capital extends existing temporal frameworks in international student research. Brown (2009) documented the transformative dimensions of international sojourns as time-dependent: deeper

cultural and linguistic adjustment requires sustained exposure. Schartner and Young (2016) noted that short-term students represent a distinct adjustment trajectory from degree-seeking students. The present study adds a phonological dimension to this temporal analysis: phonological adaptation follows an exposure-dependent learning curve that may require a semester or more before automatic processing is established. Students in semester-length exchanges, short-cycle professional programs, or intensive summer courses may face the full burden of phonological dissonance without access to the adaptation time that longer programs provide.

DISCUSSION

Phonological Dissonance as a Structural Dimension of Adaptation

The seven themes documented above collectively support the central argument of this paper: that intra-English phonological transition constitutes a structural dimension of international student adaptation, not an incidental or temporary inconvenience. Phonological dissonance generated sustained extraneous cognitive load (Sweller et al., 2019), limited participation in the forms of academic activity most central to doctoral development, and triggered identity negotiations with consequences for long-term academic investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015). These are not superficial effects. They are foundational to the academic experience.

The structural framing is important for institutional implications. A phenomenon framed as individual—a particular student’s difficulty adjusting to a new accent—invites individual-level responses: tutoring, counseling, encouragement. A phenomenon framed as structural—a predictable consequence of institutional admission practices that do not account for intra-English phonological diversity—invites institutional-level responses: curriculum design, pre-arrival preparation, faculty training. This paper argues for the structural frame.

Epistemic Access and Linguistic Capital

Bourdieu’s (1991) linguistic capital framework illuminates a dimension of the adaptation experience that cognitive load theory alone cannot account for: the symbolic dimension. Phonological divergence does not merely increase cognitive processing demands—it positions the speaker within a hierarchy of linguistic legitimacy in which American academic English occupies the normative center. This positioning affects not only how ideas are received but how students assess the worthiness of their ideas before they speak them. The epistemic consequence documented most clearly in Theme 5 is the migration of cognitive concern from content to form: from whether an idea is good to whether it can be understood. Lippi-Green (2012) analyzed this dynamic at the level of social ideology; the present study documents it at the level of individual cognitive experience.

Temporal Inequity and Program Design

The concept of time as adaptation capital has direct implications for how institutions design programs for international students. If phonological adaptation follows an exposure-dependent curve that requires approximately one semester to complete, then program structures that embed international students in high-stakes oral performance contexts in their first weeks—without phonological preparation—are setting conditions for predictable disadvantage. This is especially acute in programs shorter than a full academic year, where adaptation may remain incomplete throughout the entire enrollment. Glass et al. (2017) demonstrated that faculty interaction patterns in the first year were disproportionately consequential for international students' long-term integration. If those early interactions occur under conditions of phonological dissonance—when comprehension delay and participation hesitation are most acute—the relational patterns established in that window may be harder to revise as adaptation proceeds.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Pre-Arrival Preparation

Institutions that recruit students from British English-educated backgrounds into American academic environments can meaningfully reduce phonological dissonance through targeted pre-arrival preparation. Practical measures include providing access to recorded lectures and seminar discussions from actual courses, featuring the regional accent variation of the host institution's faculty; offering phonological comparison workshops or self-directed modules that explicitly address the systematic differences between British and American English phonology; and recommending exposure to American academic podcasts, recorded conference presentations, and documentary media in the months preceding enrollment. These measures are low-cost relative to their potential impact and do not require curriculum redesign.

Institutional and Faculty Practice

Faculty awareness of accent diversity and its cognitive consequences is a foundational institutional practice. Specific recommendations include normalizing clarification requests in seminar contexts by modeling them explicitly rather than treating them as signals of failure; building in structured wait time in seminar discussion to reduce the temporal disadvantage that delayed comprehension creates for phonological-minority students; and designing early oral assessment tasks that reward depth and specificity over speed, reducing the penalty for students whose participation rhythm is slower during the phonological adaptation phase.

Student Affairs and Onboarding

International student orientation programs can incorporate explicit phonological preparation rather than treating English proficiency as a settled matter for students from English-medium educational backgrounds. Peer mentoring programs pairing new international students with more established students who have navigated similar phonological transitions can provide practical coping strategies while reducing the isolation that phonological dissonance can generate. Counseling services should be briefed on phonological dissonance as a named and theorized experience so that students who present with confidence erosion or participation avoidance are offered the conceptual frame that allows them to understand their experience as structural rather than personal.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is bounded by the experiences of one researcher in one institutional context, with a specific national and educational background. The phonological dynamics of British-to-American English transition may differ substantially from other intra-English transitions, and future research is needed to map the landscape of intra-English phonological transitions across the full range of internationally mobile student populations. The retrospective nature of the data introduces the reconstruction limitations inherent in memory work (Conway, 1990): the theoretical framework brought to the analysis inevitably shaped what was attended to in recall.

Future research could profitably employ prospective designs, longitudinal surveys, or ecological momentary assessment methods to capture phonological dissonance experiences in real time rather than retrospectively. Comparative studies examining students from multiple outer-circle English backgrounds within the same host institution would allow systematic identification of which phonological features generate the greatest decoding burden and for which student populations. Research on the effectiveness of specific pre-arrival phonological preparation interventions would strengthen the institutional recommendations offered in this paper.

In practical terms, three clusters of recommendations follow from this analysis. First, pre-arrival preparation should include explicit exposure to the phonological patterns of the host academic environment through recorded lectures, seminars, and guided comparison of accent features. Secondly, faculty can mitigate participation inequities by building in wait time, normalizing clarification requests, and weighting depth of contribution over speed in early assessments. Last, international student services and academic support units can name phonological dissonance as a legitimate adaptation challenge and provide targeted resources and peer mentoring for students navigating intra-English accent transitions.

CONCLUSION

Accent is not merely sound. This paper has argued that for international students navigating intra-English phonological boundaries, accent constitutes access—to content, to participation, to the symbolic legitimacy that academic belonging requires. It constitutes cognitive load—an additional extraneous demand that competes with the intellectual work that doctoral study demands. And it constitutes a temporal resource: an adaptation process that unfolds over months and that institutions are not currently designed to support.

For the internationally mobile student who arrives at an American institution with a British English-based education and formal fluency, the assumption that English is English—that phonological adaptation is unnecessary or trivial—is both false and consequential. Recognizing phonological dissonance as a structural dimension of adaptation, rather than an individual deficit, opens institutional possibilities for preparation and support that are currently largely unrealized. The students who would benefit are already present in our programs. The question is whether our institutions are designed to see what they are managing.

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