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Language Identity Formation of Second Language Graduate Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Taking a social identity theory approach, this qualitative phenomenological study investigates how international graduate students from three Asian nations in the United States establish their language identities. The study employs informal interviews with six individuals from three Asian nations to inquire about the significance of their individual experiences as they relate to the formation of their linguistic identities. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain this data since they allowed for an in-depth examination of the participants' experiences. Interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic data analysis to determine overarching themes. Initial results show that learning a new language presents substantial obstacles for students studying abroad. These include difficulties with pronunciation, communication, and adjustment to culture. Taking language classes and making friends with local students prove to be significant identity-forming experiences. Identity and cultural adaptation are also shown to be influenced by American institutions, such as universities and their professors. The findings of this study can have important significance for institutions that may utilize them to improve the services they offer to international students and create a more welcoming and supportive atmosphere. The study acknowledges its own limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a narrow emphasis on language identity, indicating that more research is needed to investigate the role of language in the formation of international students' identities.

Keywords: International Graduate Students; Language Identity Formation; Second Language Learners

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1. Introduction

Identity can be viewed as a historically evolving, multidimensional concept. Stories of the individual play a vital role in the development of individual identities, and second language acquisition is essential to the identities of the massive population of multilingual people all over the globe. Identity is a person's sense of self as a distinct, independent person, including their own image and self-awareness, and is a key factor in sociocultural development [1]. Individuals' identities influence how they perceive themselves and others [2]. Identity and self in the second or foreign language research area have received a great deal of focus from second language acquisition (SLA) researchers in the past few decades [3–6]. This may be due to the fact that in many American universities, the number of international students has increased steadily over many decades. Since 1954, in the form of the Open Doors survey, the Institute of International Education has collected data on international student enrollment in the United States. The 2007–2008 report indicates a national upward trend, with a 7% increase from the previous year to a record 623,805 international students (Institute of International Education, 2008). As American universities continue to recruit international students and grow into global markets, the developing community is worthy of consideration, as those who belong to this group are proper individuals in academic communities of practice in the United States [7].

1.1. Review of Literature

Depending on the theoretical framework, identity is quite complicated and is understood in different ways [8]. In his intriguing book, Joseph [9] addresses the relationship between language and identity in detail. He discusses the manner in which language speakers can describe nationality. According to Rahimian[10], the people we interact with have an effect on our identity, which is a kind of tacit or explicit knowledge about who we are. We now see communication as playing a larger role in the knowledge construction of individuals, thanks to the influence of post-Enlightenment philosophies like constructivism [11,12]. As a social tool, language is central to the core tenets of social identity theory, which views identities and selves as "products of language" [13]. A person's sense of self evolves alongside their mental, emotional, and physical development. Most monolinguals' sense of self can be traced back to their own unique physiological and psychological maturation processes in this way [14]. It's also worth noting that sociologists and psychologists have investigated the topic of identity [15].

1.2. The Significance of Identity to SLA

According to García [16] and Coyle [17], identity challenges emerge in classes where students learn a language that is not their native tongue. Peirce [18] is credited with introducing the concept of identity to SLA discourse. Correspondingly, the incorporation of identity into SLA discussions has become more prevalent. Peirce [18] highlighted the importance of investing in SLA while recognizing the inadequacy of existing theories to account for language learners' social inclusion in L2 learning contexts. She began a discussion by trying to argue that the identities of second-language learners are inextricably linked with their attempts to enhance their language skills. Scholars in second language acquisition must consider the social identity of college students in English-speaking countries who speak a second language. Richards and Schmidt [19] define identity as "a person's sense of themselves as a distinct individual, including self-image and self-awareness". When instructing a second language, it is also important to take into account the capabilities and flexibility of an individual's identity [20]. Due to the fluidity of identity and the inseparability or hybridity of plurilingualism's identities [21,22], the L2 learner's identity in both L1 and L2 and the relationship between them are likely to change and develop over time. Rahimian [10] assumed that in English-speaking countries, students learning English as a second language may have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They may be immigrants, international students, exchange students, refugees, or asylum seekers.

So, according to Ortactepe [23], international students are "enrolled in higher education institutions in the host culture". Rahimian [10] asserted that an international student is defined as a non-native speaker enrolled in a university in an English-speaking country in order to earn a degree. These students can be divided into two sub-groups: 1) those who intend to remain in the English-speaking country after earning their degrees; and 2) those who do not in-

tend to remain in the English-speaking country after graduation and primarily want to return to their home countries.

Literature has examined the identity issues of international students enrolled in universities in English-speaking countries. Burnapp [21] examined a group of international students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes course in the United Kingdom. He contends that expecting complete acculturation from international students is not a reasonable expectation and that hybridity should be anticipated and acknowledged in areas related to learning style and identity formation. Haugh (2008) [9] contends that identity is a dynamic entity that is formed collaboratively through negotiation and interaction among people. Rahimian [10] believed that if international students in a country do not have sufficient opportunities to discuss their L2 identities with speakers of L2, their L2 identities may remain underdeveloped.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

Identity is quite complex and is interpreted in a variety of ways [8]. Social identity theory is one of the theories that examines how individuals acquire their identities as they learn languages and interact with other individuals in their communities [24]. Weedon [25] explains that individuals are considered "subjects" in the sense that they can be bound by a variety of relationships in one social site or pertain to a variety of interactions in another social site. In the first scenario, the individual would be in a minoritized position, whereas in the second scenario, the individual would have stronger influence as compared to other people. An individual's subjectivity, or what could be deemed their identity, has always been formed in relational terms; the person has not really stood separated from the social world but remains an integrated part and foundational component of it [26].

However, it seems that looking at international students' identities through the lens of social identity theory has been neglected, so far, Burnapp [21], in his study, examined a group of international students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course in the United Kingdom. He contends that expecting complete acculturation from international students is not a reasonable expectation and that hybridity should be anticipated and acknowledged in areas related to learning style and identity formation. In his research area, Burnapp [21] focused only on issues related to international graduate students to discover the cultural challenges these students faced, and then he made suggestions for enhancing their educational pursuits based on theories of cultural adaptation.

Comparing the opinions about the language experiences of international graduate students to what was expected of their instructors, mentors, and tutors, Belcher [27], Cadman [28], and Ridley [29] demonstrated inconsistencies as well as challenges in three reviewed studies in the US, Australia, and the United Kingdom. In all these analyzed studies, language has been highlighted as an essential indicator in determining the experiences of international students, and none of them carefully considered how the international student faced the challenges in the process of their identity formation. Thus, research focusing on issues related to international graduate students has mostly concentrated on discovering the challenges these students faced and on the so-called "problem framework" and suggestions for enhancing the educational pursuits of international students [30]. Therefore, in this study, using a sociocultural perspective on identity [31] and taking into account the previous research on international students' identity formation experiences (e.g., Oikonomidoy and Williams [32], Pham and Saltmarsh [33], the researchers attempted to interpret identity by considering the language issues of six international students during their studies in the US. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore international students' language challenges in a second language context and to understand how graduate students in the United States can learn to acclimate to the American English context and shape their new identity. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What challenges do international graduate students in the US experience in the formation of their new identity?

RQ2. What is the role of environmental factors in shaping international students' identities?

2. Methodology

2.1. Positionality of the Researchers

Our position, identity, and cultural background as Iranian and Pakistani graduate students conducting interviews

on language identity with participants from India, Iran, and Pakistan may have impacted the research procedure and the interpretation of the results. We identified ourselves as Iranian and Pakistani women and acquired Persian and Pakistani as our first languages as children. Additionally, the Iranian and Pakistani researchers lived and worked in Iran and Pakistan for many years, as well as in the US since 2022 and 2018, respectively, and all of these experiences have provided these researchers with cultural insights from both contexts. As researchers, like the participants involved, they had been affected by learning English in the US. As an Iranian international researcher studying the formation of language identity, my insider position with regard to the Iranian participant could be a facilitative factor in this research, as my insider knowledge of Iranian culture and language would help me understand the Iranian participant's perspective. According to Merriam et al. [34], when conducting interviews with people from the same nation but "away from home," the mutually considered homogeneity can foster a sense of community, and this can increase participants' trust and transparency throughout the research process. As outside researchers interviewing Indian and Pakistani participants, we found creating trust and rapport with the other international participants essential since it might be more difficult for them to disclose personal information and experiences with someone who does not share their nationality.

Hence, to ascertain the integrity of the research, we performed member checking, which involves distributing the research findings to the participants and requesting their feedback on the data's accuracy and interpretation. This could ensure that the research findings accurately reflect the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Also, throughout the research process, we participated in reflexivity as researchers by recognizing and critically examining our positionality, biases, and assumptions. We found that the credibility and openness of the research can be improved by recognizing and addressing all possible sources of bias.

2.2. Sampling

Participants in this study were recruited through personal contacts based on their status as international students in higher education and their willingness to participate in the study. All six participants were selected from among graduate students studying at one of the Midwest universities in the United States. The goal was to ensure that the sample was diverse in terms of nationality but from the same continent, so participants were chosen from South and Central Asia, including two Indians, two Iranians, and two Pakistanis. Thus, the sampling strategy for this study was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a widely used sampling strategy in qualitative research [35]. According to Creswell [36], purposive sampling is appropriate for studies if researchers need to gather data in detail from participants' unique experiences. Moreover, using purposive sampling allowed for the selection of participants who were representative of the diverse international student population in the United States [37].

The Indian participants were English-speaking graduate students; their native mother tongue was Telugu; they could speak Gujarati; and their official first language was Hindi, which is a mixture of Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit. They were both born in Kolkata, and one of them had the experience of living in different places in India. He started learning English when he entered middle school. They both started their education in the US in 2020–2021. One of them might need more time to complete his PhD due to his returning to his country for eight months and spending some time there. They both identified themselves as Indian internationals living in the US.

The other two participants were from Iran, and their mother tongue was Persian; they identified themselves as Iranian international students in the US. They also started school in 2020–2021. Their native language in their home country was Persian, and both of them started learning English in high school as a foreign language course.

The last group consisted of participants from Pakistan. They were graduate students, speaking Urdu, Panjabi, and English. They were born in Pakistan and were pursuing their PhDs in the United States. They identified themselves as foreign speakers, especially when it came to their language ability.

2.3. Data Collection

This research utilizes a phenomenological design by conducting informal interviews with six participants from three Asian countries (see Appendix). As Marshall and

Rossman [38] noted, "phenomenological approaches seek to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience". Also, according to Van Manen [39], in phenomenological studies, the researcher seeks to discover the essence of a phenomenon by examining its particular manifestations.

The data collection method used in this study was informal semi-structured interviews because they have been found to be very effective in eliciting rich and detailed data about participants' experiences, as they allow for the exploration of multiple topics and the opportunity for participants to elaborate on their experiences [40]. According to Seidman [41], the semi-structured interview guide is a common approach in qualitative research, as it provides a framework for the interviewer while also allowing for flexibility in the conversation. For this study, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to guide the interviews, which included open-ended questions about participants' experiences of studying abroad in higher education, their language challenges, and their identity concerns.

The interviews were conducted individually with each participant (See Appendix). Depending on the participants' availability and preferences, interviews with Indian and Pakistani participants were conducted in person due to their availability, while the interviews with Iranians were recorded via Zoom conferencing. All interviews were audio recorded using the Voice Memo app, and field notes were taken during and throughout coding to capture observations and insights. These interviews lasted for over 45 minutes. During the process of data collection, I took some notes, and after the meetings, I listened to all of these recorded interviews, and became familiar with the major points that the interviewees had mentioned. To finalize the collection of my data, I cleared up all the redundant quotes from them, and then I started the coding and analysis of all my obtained data. All participants provided written consent by signing a consent form. Their signed consent forms were collected and stored securely.

3. Results

For data analysis, I was able to adhere to fundamental qualitative methods through the use of semi-structured interviews and an inductive, thematic data analysis [42–44]. I followed a pattern in identifying the language identity experiences of participants across cultures and nations. Thus, I transcribed the interviews and then coded the data according to the emerging themes. This process was done through Microsoft Word tracking and comments. I obtained a wide range of codes, but in my analysis and extraction of themes, I did not use all these codes. The analysis included two rounds: first, I performed open coding with color coding, and then those open codes were compared to the other codes, allowing me to figure out how these codes could lead me to extract some themes. With reference to my research question, I tried to eliminate unnecessary codes and extract certain themes from them.

3.1. Preliminary Findings

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews was then subjected to analysis in order to discover common themes and patterns among the responses of the participants. This section summarizes the key findings of the study, with an emphasis on the main themes that were developed from the data. More specifically, in this section, getting to know about the historical language background of the participants, the researchers examined the issues international students face with English language learning, the identity and language challenges they face in the context of a second language, and the strategies they used for dealing with those obstacles.

3.2. Their Language History

The L2 speakers disclosed different amounts of time that they spent studying English. The experiences of one of the Indian participants' family, community, and school have shaped and developed his linguistic background. His mother introduced some English vocabulary to her children, predominantly through nurturing settings such as bath time. This Indian participant remembered visiting his grandparents, as they were from the past generation and affected by colonization and its outcomes. They learned English well, and spending some time with them could effectively help him learn the language.

In the Indian context, despite the encouragement one of the other Indian participants received from certain instructors and the large number of Indian students at his school, his language, culture, and identity were frequently

challenged. He remembered the challenge that he encountered in his early school years, which led him to decide to learn English more purposefully:

> *"In kindergarten, I had an American-native substitute instructor who did not recognize or make any attempt to figure out the need to use the restroom. The teacher was visibly offended by the fact that he, as a substitute instructor, had to clean up the mess after I was unable to make it to class on time due to my struggle to obtain permission in English. I vividly recall this horrifying experience and the manner in which it ultimately influenced my language development."*

The Iranian participant's story was somewhat different:

> *"I started learning English professionally from the time that I decided to study abroad. So, I purposefully started studying English for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System), and having this test score would help me in completing my application to some higher education institutions in the US. So, I was in a very forceful English immersion situation. My ESL instructor's strict methods and my purpose for studying abroad inspired me to learn the English language quickly and effectively."*

The Pakistani participants started learning basic English in elementary school. One of them mentioned that:

> *"I did not take any language course here. As for the purpose of studying abroad, I had to take the GRE and standard language test in my home country to be able to apply to US universities. So, I had obtained the minimum language requirement to enter the United States."*

In answering the research questions of this study, the best way to describe the analysis of semi-structured interview transcripts was a structural coding analysis. In this type of analysis, a code refers to memos that are employed to sum up and classify data [45]. For each interview transcript excerpt, codes were employed to denote the essence of its meaning. In accordance with [45], these codes are then grouped and classified according to their overarching themes or the themes that a researcher considers within them. The emerging themes from the challenges they faced in the new second language environment and the answers provided by them regarding how they tried to adjust to the US milieu are shown below.

To answer the first research question, "What challenges do international graduate students in the US experience in the formation of their new identity?" some codes have been attained. They are reported as follows:

3.3. Language Issues

Almost all Indian and Iranian students expressed having issues with specific sounds and accents and having to double-check their pronunciation. In spite of having sufficient background knowledge of the English language as Indian peers, they had problems with the American accent. While the Indian students stated that they were able to adapt to a new environment and communicate more effectively than before, all other Iranian and Pakistani students seemed to struggle with speaking, whether as a result of shyness or a feeling that their language skills were inadequate. The marginalization caused them to feel stressed, which adversely impacted their L2 communication.

As one of the Indian participants claimed:

> *"Initially, when I moved here, I learned that American English is a little different from the kind of English that we have learned. It was difficult for me to understand the American accent of the native speakers, but I slowly got used to listening to them, and within three months I was able to fluently converse with them."*

One of the Iranian students mentioned the communication breakdown that exists between him and the American community, especially his professor:

> *"When I examine myself, the primary factor that affects my speaking is not just my accent but how I feel when I speak to a person, such as my supervisor, who is always composed and fair. But if I talk to my international friends, who I know don't speak English fluently, I am able to communicate more effectively."*

One of the Pakistani students expressed concern that their identity is not comprehended or appreciated in their new environment. The Pakistani student expressed the feeling that they are unable to fully communicate themselves, especially when it comes to their sense of humor. He mentioned that "at home, I was known for my sense of humor, but not here, as in this context, I was not able to be so expressive."

Also, the other Iranian recounted experiencing cultural shocks upon her arrival in the United States, especially in terms of language usage and informality:

> *"When I came here, I felt a kind of curiosity or shock. For example, in the language among the teenagers, which is even normal in other countries as well, they are giving you an informative statement, but they pronounce it in a question format. So I think there is a name for it... It was really interesting that I saw it in Iran and in my country as well among teenagers, but here it is too much, and I think that our country or our teenagers may get inspired by foreigners in speaking like that."*

3.4. Integration into American Society

The Iranian and Pakistani students address the difficulties of integrating into American society, referring to language as an important impediment to communication and academic self-expression, whereas the Indian students highlighted the importance of knowing English for self-confidence and self-esteem. One of them mentioned, "I think if I know English enough, that actually helps me be self-assertive enough, so it does play a major role in someone's self-esteem."

One of the Iranian participants said, "I can't express myself because I am not fluent in English (especially with respect to my pronunciation ability). I feel like it hinders my possibilities a lot. I can think of English as just a medium of communication, though."

One of the Pakistani participants stated, "I found my difficulty to be due to the sense of being a minority, a lack of familiarity with the English language, and proficiency difficulties."

One of the Iranian students mentioned that he is strongly in favor of the importance of preserving his own cultural heritage and identity while adapting to American customs and standards, while the Pakistani and Indian students, in general, believed in the importance of having an open mind and respect for cultural differences in order to foster positive interactions and be self-assertive within the American community.

3.5. Adjusting to American Culture

The Iranian individuals highlighted the importance and, in the meantime, the difficulty of getting rid of some past behaviors and previous identities while embracing new selves, which was not addressed by the other participants from the two other countries.

One of the Iranians stated that:

> *"I struggled to move on from my past identities and embrace my new selves. For example, I used to be a person who expressed my feelings and trusted people around me very quickly, but with the emergence of a bunch of problems, I tried to suppress and fade this feeling, and especially here in the US, I feel more comfortable because I set aside this habit of being open to everybody."*

Valuing the culture of one's home country would be the main principle for another Indian participant. However, he mentioned reverse culture shock, which he experienced as he felt difficulty reconnecting with old friends and family after living in the US for two years and upon travelling to India. It caused misunderstandings with the home cul-

ture's principles and customs, as an individual would feel like he no longer belonged to his previous group and had abandoned his sense of identity, consequently forming a new identity. He claimed that:

"If I return to India, I will continue to honor my culture while also appreciating the valuable lessons and experiences I gained during my time abroad. But, on my first trip to India after two years living in the US, I faced significant communication challenges, and I quickly realized that the US environment has affected me, and even my family could not understand me and my viewpoints well."

One of the Pakistani participants said, "Back in Pakistan, I never used to eat beef, but after coming here, I explored those options and things like that, which helped me culturally figure out stuff and give a different perspective on how things are."

RQ2. What is the role of environmental factors in shaping international students' identities?

To answer the second research question, the following codes and detailed descriptions have been reported:

3.6. The Role of Communities of Practice

All participants agreed that interacting with local students can be extremely beneficial for their identity formation. One of the Indians discussed the difficulty of understanding accents, but he was able to communicate effectively by interacting with locals. The other Indian asserted that "engaging with native Americans helped me communicate effectively in the US. This is like the best thing that could honestly help anyone survive better."

The Pakistani students mentioned, "how interacting with local students broadened my understanding of different cultures". The other Pakistani said, "I still have my Pakistani accent, but you know some of my friends are native Americans and some are internationals, so it should not be so difficult." Also, the Iranian student talked about a program that employs American students as dialogue facilitators, which he found to be extremely useful, not only in terms of language but also emotionally. The other Iranian also asserted that "my neighbor is American, and interacting with her made me feel better with respect to my language skills."

As a whole, all students agree that interacting with locals can help them shape their language identity, and their experiences and perspectives regarding the specific benefits of this interaction could be helpful to these participants.

3.7. The Role of Language Courses

The Iranian, Indian, and Pakistani participants have different viewpoints on how they can successfully learn a second language. One of the Iranian participants believed that taking language courses allows them to adjust to their new environment and gain cultural awareness, whereas for the Indian participant, choosing the independent study to improve their language skills would be a better option. For one of the Pakistani participants, on the other hand, utilizing online resources and physical engagement with native speakers to learn and acclimate to various accents and dialects would be a helpful facilitator.

One of the Iranian participants assumed that:

> *"It is good to know some of the cultural differences. I think learning those things is good, but the universities here, the institutions, and the schools can provide training courses or some language courses that I think they have here, just like orientation sessions. Right. Yeah, it's good, for example. I myself learned a lot during the conversations in the Conversation Café meetings held by our university."*

The Indian participant asserted that "If I need to learn English, this can be done by taking help online from some online resources."

The Pakistani participant believed that:

> *"Online resources and engaging with native English speakers have further honed my language skills, helping me adapt to various accents and dialects. While I appreciate my mother tongue, I recognize the importance of English as a global language and feel comfortable using it as a medium of instruction."*

3.8. The Role of American Institutional Behavior

The impact of American institutions on shaping identity in the international student language-learning experience is a theme shared by all of these Asian participants. Each participant's cultural background influences their communication styles, assertiveness, and behavior. The Iranian participants emphasized the professor's role as a facilitator of language learning in a non-authoritarian context. One of them said that:

> *"I used to live in a high context culture with a centralized system; usually you have a hierarchy in the school, even the teacher, but here it's more bottom-up; everybody has apower in it, and there is no authority in the institution, at least in my department."*

Also, the Indian participants emphasized cultural differences in communication styles and the influence of a more collaborative approach in the United States on his assertiveness. One of them claimed that:

> *"The colleagues and professors I have in the US are not afraid to be challenged; by interacting with them, I realized that it is okay to ask questions and even criticize them, and this is something I have started appreciating more because of the people from my institution."*

The Pakistani participants emphasized the influence of institutional behavior on his own cultural practices and the necessity of adapting to new contexts by removing competitive and individualized feelings from themselves. One of them said:

> *"If I were in Pakistan, I would definitely show a different reaction, and I would show more competitive behavior with my colleagues. Additionally, what I learned here is that you should kind of remove that 'I' from yourself. For example, my language should be other than speaking about myself and my identity, and I'm trying to remove that 'I' from giving a lecture in the class and also a lot of other things, and I assume our education system in the US as a whole contributed effectively to this change in me."*

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine how graduate students in the United States adapt to American English and how their identities were formed in this new context. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design with a purposive sampling of six graduate students from three South and Central Asian countries attending a university in the Midwest of the United States. Informal, semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method. The findings highlighted the language obstacles faced by international students, their identity and language concerns in a second language context, as well as the strategies they employed for overcoming these barriers. This part highlights several key themes that emerged from the experiences of Indian, Iranian, and Pakistani graduate students as they adapted to the American English language and culture.

The language difficulties faced by international students, such as difficulties with specific sounds and accents, could be the primary themes of this study. The Iranian students also reported feelings of shyness and a deficiency in their language skills, which can hinder their ability to communicate and express themselves thoroughly. The role of the US environment, including cultural norms and customs, also emerged as a central theme. The Pakistani students discussed the challenges of adjusting to new cultural contexts and accepting new identities. The Pakistani participant thought of himself as a minority and did not feel safe communicating with others. The Iranian participants were open to adapting to the new environment and embracing a new identity, while the Indian participant was in favor of respecting his home beliefs despite experiencing reverse culture shock upon short travel to India. Also, interacting with locals and taking language classes were identified as significant factors in the formation of international students' new identities. The students shared diverse perspectives on the advantages of interacting with locals

and how to effectively learn a second language, with each participant employing a unique strategy for acclimating to various accents.

Social identity theory serves as a framework for comprehending the acclimatization experiences of international students to American English and culture. Several relationships exist between social identity theory and this study's findings. Initially, evaluating the roles of social groups in the identity construction of English as a second language (ESL) speakers can also support the concept of communities of practice [46], which gives us the freedom to evaluate "achieved," "assigned," and "ascribed" identities [47]. According to Furnham [48], culture shock may occur when an individual lacks "points of reference, social norms, and rules to guide interactions and understand the behavior of others". These findings suggest that cultural background and interactions via adaptation to culture can shape international students' sense of identity. This resonates with my Iranian participant's statement and how the difficulties of assimilating into American society and communicating with American natives affected him. Iranian participants experienced culture shock because of language differences. Meanwhile, they try to adapt to American standards. However, all students emphasized the significance of preserving their cultural heritage and identity. To foster positive interactions, the Indian participants emphasized the importance of valuing cultural differences.

Second, the study highlights the influence of American institutions, such as professors, colleagues, and organizational behavior, on the identities of international students. This is consistent with social identity theory's premise that the groups to which individuals belong and their interactions with other groups contribute to shaping their identities. The interactions of international students with American institutions may influence their sense of self and their capacity to adjust to a new cultural context. Moreover, Lave and Wenger's [46] legitimate peripheral participation framework can be utilized to clarify the participants' linguistic experiences. In terms of language, the English-speaking world in which the international students resided and studied can be considered a community of practice. According to Lave and Wenger [46], international speakers who are new in the American setting can interact with native English speakers in this community. Gradually, they proceed toward full involvement and integration with Americans when their English proficiency reaches that of a native speaker.

Finally, the role of American institutions in the formation of identity through the language-learning experiences of international students was highlighted. The students discussed the impact of professors and institutional behavior on their communication styles, assertiveness, and behavior, highlighting the significance of adapting to new contexts and cultural practices. This finding can be regarded as a mismatch with what Halic, Greenberg and Paulus [7] recommended in their study. They conducted phenomenological research on several international students, and although they were in favor of any support from instructors and the community, they significantly pinpointed the role of learner-centered instructional design in shaping students' language and academic identity. However, the present study's findings were in harmony with Rahimian's [10] results. He conducted a mixed-methods study on some international teaching assistants, investigating issues related to identity, accent, and intelligibility. He found that there was a connection between identity and access to professional communities. According to Brown [49] and Moreland [50], becoming a member of a group would alter how individuals perceive themselves through a process of self-redefinition, and this point highlighted the importance of the role of American institutions in promoting diversity and inclusion.

I attempted to make the most of the limited time and contextual resources available by focusing on useful and substantial theoretical frameworks and implementing them deliberately in the research. However, as this study limited my research to the Midwest part of the US, further research is needed to see how international students view other Americans in other states and how their identity can be shaped by integration with other states' communities. One of the major limitations of the study was its small sample size. I recruited just six international students. Increasing the sample size could be advantageous for a more thorough examination of the concepts as well as to improve the research's robustness and comprehensiveness.

In terms of limitations and future research, the researchers may not be adept in the students' native languages, which could pose a language barrier. This may re-

duce the precision of the information gathered, especially when it comes to the nuances of students' language experiences. Also, the research concentrates mainly on language identity formation, but there are numerous supplementary variables that impact cultural and social identity formation among international Asian students, including religion, race, and ethnicity. The study could fail to reflect all aspects of students' experiences due to its limited emphasis on language. All in all, taking these points into consideration can pave the way for other researchers to expand identity formation research in future studies.

5. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the experiences of international graduate students adjusting to the American English language and culture. The themes that emerged from their experiences highlight the difficulties of language barriers and integration into society, the significance of maintaining identity while adjusting to American customs, and the important role of communities of practice, language courses, and American institutions in shaping the identities of international students. Numerous stakeholders, including universities, language instructors, and international students, may find the research's multiple implications pertinent. Some of the potential implications are:

Higher education institutions can use the findings of this study to enhance their support services, such as language courses, orientation programs, and counseling services, to assist international students in adapting to the language and culture of the United States. Universities can also use the findings relating to unfavorable preconceived notions in the adjustment of international students to the US environment to promote diversity and inclusion and foster a welcoming and encouraging environment for international students. The study emphasizes the significance of maintaining cultural identity while adapting to American customs to promote mutual understanding. Universities can use these findings to support initiatives that enable international students to share their cultural heritage with American students and faculty. The study emphasizes the impact of American institutions, such as professors and institutional behavior, on the development of the identities of international students. Universities can use such results to enhance their institutional practices and foster the academic and personal growth of international students.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.E. and N.K.; methodology, M.E. and N.K.; formal analysis, M.E.; investigation, M.E.; resources, M.E.; data curation, M.E.; writing—M.E., writing—review and editing, M.E.; visualization, M.E.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institutional Research Committee and received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Kansas State University. The approval reference number is 11691. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study. Ethical approval was granted on 05/31/2023.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study

Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the personal experiences shared during these interviews, access to the raw interview transcripts is restricted to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. However, a summarized version of the interview data, including anonymized excerpts that illustrate key themes and findings, can be made available in the supplementary materials accompanying this article upon publication. This summarized dataset provides a representative overview of the participants' experiences while safeguarding their identities and personal details. Researchers interested in accessing the summarized interview data can do so by contacting the corresponding author at marzieheb@ksu.edu.

Requests for access will be considered on a case-by-case basis, with consideration given to maintaining the confidentiality of the participants. Any usage of the sum-

marized dataset should adhere to ethical guidelines and principles for protecting participant privacy. I understand the importance of transparency and reproducibility in research, and I strive to balance this with my ethical responsibility to safeguard the privacy of our participants. I appreciate your understanding and cooperation in adhering to the access restrictions outlined in this statement.

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Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest for the researchers involved in this study.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What challenges do they face regarding the English language in the US?

2. How difficult was it to integrate with American natives?

3. Can you tell me how your sense of identity has been affected by spending time in the US? (Please provide me with an example)

4. How do you think engaging with local students can help shape your identity better?

5. How do you think taking some language courses can help to improve language skills?

6. How do you feel that institutional behavior impacts your identity? Can you provide an example?

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