

# Coping with diverse accented English: Comprehension strategies employed by East Asian international students at an Australian university

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**Eunjae Park**

Griffith University: [eunjae.park@griffith.edu.au](mailto:eunjae.park@griffith.edu.au)

*This study investigates strategies employed by East Asian international students to cope with comprehension barriers caused by different types of English accents. While these students face a range of comprehension barriers caused by unfamiliar accented English (from both native speakers and speakers of other languages), little is known about how these students overcome the challenges during their study journey. Using a qualitative survey approach, this study addresses the research question: What coping strategies are employed by East Asian international students to mitigate the comprehension barriers caused by different types of accents? A thematic analysis of written responses from 306 East Asian students at an Australian university revealed that there were two main strategies: (a) verbal strategies, and (b) non-verbal strategies. The first theme emphasises an immediate attempt to repair communication breakdowns via, for example, meaning negotiation. The second theme focuses on self-discipline or actions to enhance overall comprehension skills, such as using authentic materials. Practical implications for improvement of these students' experiences include initiatives to raise awareness of intercultural communication challenges and increased learning support to enhance these students' intercultural engagement.*

*Keywords: comprehension barriers; accent unfamiliarity; East Asian students; coping strategies*

## INTRODUCTION

Recruiting international students is a key priority in internationalising higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and universities have dedicated themselves to assisting these students to live and work conjointly in the globalised context (Knight, 1997). Over five million students undertook higher education degrees outside their country of origin in 2017, more than doubling the reported number in 2000 (OECD, 2019). Australia is ranked after the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) as one of the traditional study destinations among these students. The number of international students in Australian higher education has shown persistent growth over the past two decades, from 60,914 in 1999 to 442,210 in 2019 (Australian Government, 2020). This trend in student mobility is anticipated to slow down in the next few years due to the

Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). However, Northeast, followed by Southeast, Asian students continue to represent the largest cohorts in Australian higher education.

International students enrolled at foreign universities are generally eager to succeed; nevertheless, their success often entails facing and overcoming a wide range of social and academic challenges. An extensive body of research has been dedicated to investigation of the challenges faced by students whose first language is not English (L2) during their period of study (Campbell & Li, 2008; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Malau-Aduli, 2011; Nayak & Venkatraman, 2010; Sawir et al., 2012). These studies have frequently drawn the conclusion that limited language proficiency is a key barrier adversely influencing their social and academic well-being on campus. Notwithstanding that language proficiency is indispensable for L2 students, the argument reinforces the view that insufficient language proficiency is at the centre of their social and academic difficulties and that the solution to the problem lies with the students. However, comprehension barriers (in this case, difficulties in comprehending what the speaker intends to convey)—the focus of this study—are not always related to deficits in basic linguistic abilities of L2 students.

With the increased cultural and linguistic diversity presenting at Australian institutions, multiple variations in accents of linguistically diverse English users exist for L2 students to manage in everyday communication situations. If the interlocutor's accent sounds unfamiliar or is perceived as strong, it can result in interference in L2 students' comprehensibility (i.e., the listener's ability to understand a speaker's message; Matsuura et al., 2014). Such problems that Matsuura et al. (2014) described as "accent unfamiliarity" refer to the limited ability in understanding different pronunciations. Different types of accents (both first language [L1] and L2 accents) have been repeatedly reported by L2 students as one of the major challenges in their social and academic interactions, leading to delays in their adjustment to new learning environments (Campbell & Li, 2008; Nayak & Venkatraman, 2010; Park, 2016; Sawir, 2005; Sawir et al., 2012). Due to their status as L2 speakers, their interlocutors often place blame for miscommunication on these students based on the assumption that the students' proficiency is the sole issue, failing to share their own responsibilities within the communicative act (Lippi-Green, 2012; Park, 2016).

While the challenges caused by accent unfamiliarity have been recognised and even highlighted in the research literature, until recently, existing literature has overlooked this aspect of language barriers encountered by L2 students. This study is a part of broader quantitative research that investigated a wide range of accent-related challenges contributing to East Asian students' study experience and how they coped with these, concentrating on the strategies employed to ameliorate the challenges. This study specifically focuses on coping strategies applied to overcome comprehension barriers caused by different types of accents. All references to "accent unfamiliarity" and "different types of accents" in this work refer to both L1 and L2 accents of English users from different parts of the world. Empirical data were collected through a survey of 306 East Asian students studying at an Australian university. The examination of employed strategies gathered in this study can be used to guide and assist future L2 students and enhance intercultural communication between the students and hosts that, in turn, should increase L2 students' satisfaction with the study experience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Comprehension barriers caused by accent unfamiliarity**

Regarding English as an international language or in the lingua franca context (ELF) in which a wide range of English with distinct phonological characteristics is used, comprehension barriers are likely to occur at the phonological level (Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011). In an earlier study on the factors affecting L2 students' comprehension, Goh (1999) established that 68% of the students reported that their comprehension was adversely influenced by the accent of speakers and by speech styles they recognised as different from the English in which they had been trained. In a more recent study, Matsuura et al. (2014) examined L2 Japanese students' comprehensibility and the effect of speech rate. They found that heavily accented Indian English significantly reduced these students' comprehension, and a slower speech rate facilitated their comprehension of the accented English. Perceived degree of accentedness can differ depending on the native language of the students, their previous linguistic experience, and their language proficiency (Matsuura et al., 2014). This contention means that instances of miscommunication and misunderstanding are sometimes beyond L2 students' language proficiency.

A large volume of higher education research has consistently confirmed the problems with accent unfamiliarity encountered by L2 students during their study journey at foreign institutions (Campbell & Li, 2008; Nayak & Venkatraman, 2010; Park, 2016; Sawir, 2005; Sawir et al., 2012), yet only one study, to our knowledge, has directly probed how accent unfamiliarity plays out in L2 students' social and academic life at Australian universities (Park, 2016). While it is uncertain how much of L2 students' actual comprehension barriers were based on accent unfamiliarity, and how much was caused by other linguistic areas, Sawir (2005) and Park (2016) demonstrated that comprehension barriers were not only related to their academic performance stress but also to the social adjustment required in their university settings. It can be argued that problems with accent unfamiliarity can be deemed as a temporary factor because they may decrease with the passage of time and length of residence (LOR) within the dominant language context. Nevertheless, these are not necessarily significant determinants in shaping L2 students' comprehension experience with different accents (Campbell & Li, 2008; Park, 2016).

A qualitative study conducted by Campbell and Li (2008) identified that Asian students with longer than two years of stay in New Zealand still had difficulties in understanding the lecture content due to the regional accents of the lecturers. The accents of L2 lecturers with low speech intelligibility (i.e., understandability of speech) sometimes were even more challenging than L1 accents because they prevented the L2 students from understanding the course requirements, leading to dissatisfaction with their learning outcomes (Nayak & Venkatraman, 2010). Park (2016) revealed that LOR in Australia did not have a differential effect between students with maximum (5+) stay and minimum stay (< 1) because the frequency of comprehension barriers for these two groups was within the same range, especially when participating in interactive classroom activities such as tutorials and classroom discussions. Other determinants, such as shortened words, slang, idiomatic expressions, speech style, and speech rate are also known to become a burden to L2 students, resulting in difficulties in comprehension of gist and important details. However, these factors were not regarded

as outweighing the challenges caused by accent unfamiliarity (Park, 2016; Sawir et al., 2012).

L2 students' comprehension barriers can trigger stereotyping and create biased judgements in L1 faculty members and peers, such as believing L2 students are less linguistically able due to their status as non-native speakers. The power of standard language ideology positions speakers of different English varieties at a disadvantage and provides a rationale for linguistic discrimination against minority groups (Lippi-Green, 2012). As Kettle (2013) contended, L2 students' accent and speech style serve as a signal in their evaluation as a conversation partner that negatively influences the likelihood of communicative success because they do not conform to the standard. This leads to unequal positions in classroom settings. For example, L2 students, who are not deemed as "legitimate speakers" and who possess no symbolic capital (i.e., commonly perceived and recognised as legitimate, prestige, authority, and so on) in that regard (Bourdieu, 1992), can be silenced, excluded, or at least marginalised compared to L1 students (Kayaalp, 2016).

Several studies have exposed the invisible power relations between L1 and L2 students in classroom interactions, discovering that Asian students sensed an assumption of unintelligence from L1 students due to their accents (Dooley, 2010; Kettle, 2013; Park, 2016). Some East Asian students in Dooley's (2010) study reported that they felt excluded from classroom discussions, and their opinions were not taken seriously. Hence, they believed that they were "looked down upon" owing to their speaking skills and accents. In the worst case, a problem with grouping was discovered; for example, some L1 students rejected L2 students who wished to join a study group, possibly because of prejudice related to L2 students' intelligence and abilities (Kettle, 2013). In a similar vein, Park (2016) found that when L2 students from East Asia struggled with the accent and speech habits (e.g., mumbling and slurring words) of L1 students during class discussions, the common reactions to the communication, as well as to the students, were those of impatience and annoyance. Consequently, the L2 students felt stigmatised and often blamed for miscommunication, as though their lack of language proficiency was the cause of communication failure even though they regarded themselves as proficient.

Apparently, the one-way communicative burden is frequently placed on L2 students due to pre-existing stereotypes towards them (Lippi-Green, 2012). Communicative burden, in Lippi-Green's (2012) words, means that L2 speakers frequently carry all responsibility for communication because L1 speakers may feel justified to refuse their role as an interlocutor. Whoever the speakers and whatever the context of communication, miscommunication is a common and inevitable phenomenon in all communication per se, when the speaker's meaning is misread or incorrectly interpreted by the listener. Even so, in practice, successful interactions are less likely to take place if either of the parties is unwilling to increase their effort or consider the value of the relationship. Unfortunately, Asian students, more than other student cohorts, are exposed to the problems of bias and discrimination (Hanassab, 2006; Houshmand et al., 2014; Lippi-Green, 2012; Park, 2016). Many L2 students feel that L1 students are not willing to engage with them and do not appreciate their efforts to make contact with them (Sawir et al., 2012). Therefore, some L2 students remain exclusively within conational or culturally similar groups and develop a disinclination to go beyond their comfortable boundaries.

Despite L2 students sometimes needing to make an extra effort to comprehend because English is not their L1, pre-existing stereotypes associated with L2 students, together with generalisations about subjective experiences with difficulties in continuing communication with L2 students, can result in communicative breakdowns. It is important to note that L2 students can have a limited ability to recognise the spoken forms of words that they already know in written form. Nevertheless, it is too often the case that these factors are denied due to recognition while the focus (and blame) remains on pre-existing stereotypes or assumptions.

### **Coping with accent unfamiliarity**

Notwithstanding that studying in foreign universities involves challenges, many students still successfully handle their social and academic integration into Australian campus environments. While a large number of studies have emerged in higher education on the subject of ameliorating a broad range of challenges faced by L2 students, including accentedness (e.g., Houshmand et al., 2014; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Malau-Aduli, 2011; Park et al., 2017), very few studies to our knowledge have investigated coping strategies in response to “comprehension barriers” caused by accent unfamiliarity (e.g., Park, 2016). Consequently, it is not well known, in detail, how L2 East Asian students manage these barriers. Given the potential adverse consequences on the students’ social and academic lives on campus, more investigation is called for to gain a better understanding of coping strategies employed by these students.

In the coping strategies literature, dealing with an accent has been a recurrent theme as part of students’ broad linguistic challenges or racial and ethnic discrimination. However, some strategies were designed to manage the challenges caused by accent on the part of L2 students. For example, students found withdrawing from academic settings and seeking advice from mental health professionals (Houshmand et al., 2014), mastering English before arrival, and learning through both formal and informal social interactions were useful coping strategies (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Malau-Aduli (2011) identified a strategy that could be effective in overcoming the barriers caused by accent unfamiliarity: Asian medical students in the study sought translation help from L1 students when they struggled with the lecturer’s accent. A mixed methods study conducted by Park (2016) revealed strategies that were specifically developed to cope with different types of accents; for example, pretending to understand and keeping a physical distance from heavily accented L1 and L2 speakers in order to reduce the opportunities of interaction. Although students were aware that using these passive strategies would not be effective in achieving communicative success, they were concerned that they could not ask for the information to be repeated by the speakers or the speakers would make incorrect judgements regarding their proficiency, placing blame for miscommunication.

Given that coping with the barriers caused by accent unfamiliarity has not been the main discussion focus in much of the research literature, this study addresses one main research question: What are the coping strategies employed by East Asian international students to mitigate the comprehension barriers caused by different types of accents? Using qualitative survey data, this study seeks to complement the important and growing body of literature. We hope that these findings will contribute to a better understanding of coping strategies that students have developed through their lived experience. It is anticipated that the findings will raise the awareness of faculty

members and university staff with regard to better ways to support future international students and enhance their intercultural learning environments.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants and settings**

This study invited full-time onshore international students from both Northeast and Southeast Asia who were undertaking either undergraduate or postgraduate programs at an Australian university to participate. The university is one of the popular institutions in Southeast Queensland in terms of international student preferences, with over 46,000 students undertaking various degree programs across many disciplines.

The major inclusion criteria for the study were (a) L2 East Asian students from English as foreign language (EFL) countries, and (b) those who started L2 acquisition after puberty in L2 environments. Previous language learning for many EFL students is limited to a native English variety and different varieties of English are rarely incorporated (Matsuura et al., 2014). Hence, it was presumed that students from EFL countries would have far less exposure to varieties of English spoken by both L1 and L2 speakers compared to those from English as second language countries, where localised varieties are embedded in their culture; such differences in the EFL context may influenced a considerable delay in comprehension. Additionally, participation was limited to those who started learning L2 in L2 environments after the age of 15, following the argument of Patkowski (1990) that age of learning matters more than LOR in determining the degree of foreign accents. It was assumed that students with a detectable foreign accent may experience accent-related issues more often than those with a less perceptible accent.

### **Survey instruments**

In order to achieve the objective of this research, a survey was designed based on the existing literature. The initial draft was tested with nine East Asian students from six countries, with the final survey revised in accordance with their comments and suggestions. Twenty-six questions were developed across four major areas: (a) demographic information, (b) background using English, (c) social and academic communication experiences on campus, and (d) the experiences of accent stereotypes and discrimination. Both close-ended and open-ended questions were included to gather their views, beliefs, challenges, and experiences.

In the first section of the survey, students were requested to indicate their gender, age, country of origin, length of stay in Australia, level of education, and areas of study. In the second section, they were asked to report any standardised language test results (e.g., IELTS). In addition, they were asked to evaluate their degree of accent and speaking and listening skills through 5-point Likert scales (e.g., *none* to *very strong* and *poor* to *excellent*). In the following section, communication experiences were measured with two 5-point Likert scales (e.g., *no difficulty/extreme difficulty* and *never/very often*). In the last section, students were asked to report stereotypical and discriminatory experiences and their consequences on their social and academic life on campus via 5-point Likert scales (e.g., *agreement/disagreement* and *never/very often*). At the end of each section, open-ended questions were designed to solicit information regarding how

students overcame the challenges and what assistance was offered from the university community to support them in this regard. This was not only because open-ended questions allowed students to freely express themselves without restricting them to select from a list of predetermined answer categories (Cohen et al., 2018), but also because no published information exists that outlines the actual criteria in predetermining response areas.

In this study, we present data from the open-ended question, “What would be the three top tips that you would give to new international students to better understand others, and why?” Students were encouraged to provide three responses at least but were not limited to three. Asking for three or more strategies was designed to stimulate more responses from them; otherwise, students could provide either no answer or only one strategy.

### **Procedure**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Ethics committee at the university before commencing data collection (GU: 2018/159). An online survey may be useful in terms of time and cost of management, whereas a paper survey tends to achieve a higher response rate (Cohen et al., 2018); therefore, both an online and a paper survey were simultaneously used to maximise response rate and counterbalance the potential barriers of both survey tools.

Data collection was carried out over a seven-week period at the selected university between June and July 2018. Both purposeful (also known as selective) sampling and snowballing sampling techniques were utilised to recruit study participants based on the pre-selected criteria (Cohen et al., 2018). Potential students were recruited via both online and in-person strategies on campus. The survey was publicised and advertised on the social media sites of East Asian student associations located at the university. At the same time, students who were approached in person on campus were able to complete either the online or paper-based survey. For those who preferred the online survey, invitations were sent via email or flyers with the survey QR code provided. The researcher also asked them to recommend the survey to their friends and peers. This snowballing technique assisted the selection of additional students via referrals from those who completed the survey or were familiar with the study.

### **Data analysis**

A total of 336 responses from the survey was collected, with some incomplete responses. Following a data cleaning process, cases with 10% or higher missing data were removed from the analysis, leaving a sample size of 306. All students were given the opportunity to provide short written responses for the question about coping strategies; a total of 214 students (70%) provided this detail. A thematic analysis was undertaken on these data. Coding and data analysis were facilitated by a qualitative data analysis tool—NVivo software (version 12). The thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with a six-stage process proposed by Braun et al. (2019). These stages included familiarisation with the data, creating initial codes, searching for themes, revising themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Twenty-four codes were initially generated that stressed relevant quotes directly answering the research question. These codes were then reduced to two themes by clustering the codes

into broad themes based on commonalities, similarities, differences, and the frequencies across the data set. Some themes were eliminated in this process due to insufficiency or irrelevance to the research questions. A further dimension in the analysis was introduced by classifying themes that were divided based on self-reported listening skills (e.g., poor, average, good, very good)—one of the areas from the larger study where significance was identified. Hence, the data were organised into four groups, divided based on the self-reported listening skills.

## **RESULTS**

### **Participants**

Demographic and general information including age, gender, nationality, current university level, and length of stay in Australia was obtained from 306 students. The proportion of female and male students was 52% ( $n = 159$ ) and 48% ( $n = 147$ ) respectively. The age of the students ranged from 20 years to over 30 years. More than half of the students were aged 20–24 (66.7%), followed by 25–30 (21.2%). Students were from China ( $n = 169$ ), Japan ( $n = 42$ ), South Korea ( $n = 29$ ), Vietnam ( $n = 21$ ), Taiwan ( $n = 18$ ), Thailand ( $n = 14$ ), Indonesia ( $n = 10$ ), and Macau ( $n = 3$ ). All students were undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate up to doctorate programs at the university. Most were undertaking a bachelor's degree (59.2%,  $n = 181$ ), followed by a master's degree (28.1%,  $n = 86$ ) across various disciplines. LOR in Australia varied from less than one year to longer than five years, with nearly half staying more than one year but less than three years (42.8%,  $n = 131$ ). A total of 31.4% of the students had recently arrived in Australia ( $n = 96$ ).

Students were asked to evaluate their listening skills on a 5-point rating scheme (1 = *poor*, 2 = *average*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *very good*, and 5 = *excellent*), and it was revealed that their listening skills ranged from poor to very good. A total of 41% of the students saw themselves as attaining average listening skills ( $n = 127$ ), followed by 30.4% ( $n = 93$ ) who viewed their skills as good. In addition, except for those who enrolled via pathway/foundation programs, they provided their standardised language test results. According to IELTS guidelines, people with scores from 6 to 6.5 are defined as competent users. Many students fell into this category (61.5%,  $n = 142$ ), followed by 28.1% who achieved 7 to 7.5 ( $n = 65$ ), who are therefore defined as good users.

### **Strategies to facilitate comprehension**

Thematic analysis discovered two themes: verbal coping strategies and non-verbal coping strategies. Students were requested to provide up to three strategies, so the number of strategies described by the students varied. The results presented in this study proved that similarities existed in developed and proposed strategies, irrespective of students' proficiency levels. However, seemingly, more proficient students tended to use more complex strategies than less proficient students. Additionally, descriptive statistics discovered differences between female and male students in using strategies, with inferential statistics (e.g., t-test) used to explore relationships between the two groups. All extracts presented in illustrating these themes are original and are not corrected for spelling or grammar.

### Verbal coping strategies

Of all the strategies students developed and proposed, meaning negotiation was the most favoured strategy ( $n = 93$ ). Meaning negotiation refers to a process that a student as a listener follows to reach a clear understanding of what the speaker is saying. In other words, when a comprehension problem occurs, students may start out with a different understanding of, or a disagreement with, the speaker. However, through negotiation sequences, which include repetition, confirmation, and checking of meanings, students believed that they would achieve mutual understanding. They supported this notion by commenting as follows (students' self-reported listening skills and survey ID are added after each quote):

Confirm what you understand is correct. It's not because our English isn't good. It's just part of communication. (Average, ID: 31)

Repeat what you heard to confirm what the other person said. (Average, ID: 11)

Students made the point that requesting repetition or clarification of a poorly understood statement was better than not asking any questions, indicating their willingness to continue the communication:

I often don't understand non-native English students. I say I don't understand to be honest and then I ask them to say again. Don't give up. Show your willingness to communicate! (Poor, ID: 12)

I sometimes do not understand what they are saying. I realized it is important to ask questions whenever I want to ask. That's very helpful to understand better what they say and improve my listening. (Average, ID 36)

Along with this strategy, students emphasised the need for maintaining social norms and etiquette when requesting repetition/clarification. Students provided some example forms of social etiquette with respect to communicating with others; for example, the need to be polite, especially when interrupting their conversation partners, and avoiding negative expressions with inappropriate tones:

It's important to ask if you don't understand. Don't hesitate to interrupt politely. (Poor, ID: 210)

When you don't understand. Just ask. Don't say yes to everything and don't be rude. Don't say things like "What? Huh? Hey, I can't understand you". (Average, ID: 96)

Asking the speaker to slow down their speech ( $n = 14$ ) was applied and suggested by the students as a strategy for comprehension. They stated that when the speech rate of the speaker was faster than normal from their perspective, they had problems in comprehending information; hence, they requested that the speaker slow down their speech:

Listen carefully. Ask them to speak in slow speed. It's very difficult to understand strong accent people speaking English too fast. (Poor, ID: 267)

If they're speaking too fast, ask them to slow down. When people speak too fast, it is natural for us to have difficulties in understanding them. So, don't worry to ask them. (Very good, ID: 284)

### **Non-verbal coping strategies**

The second theme is labelled as non-verbal strategies. Various actions were undertaken to improve overall comprehension skills, including improving the ability to accommodate diverse accents. Of all the non-verbal strategies, the most popular among the students was self-discipline ( $n = 99$ ). Students proposed two ways to become self-disciplined—using authentic materials to become accustomed to different English varieties and building vocabulary banks to support their comprehension.

Considering students' unfamiliarity with Australian English and the lack of communication experience with speakers with diverse accents, listening to the same English speakers may not be an effective way of enhancing skills in terms of accentedness. In the sense that diverse language varieties are not what students in the EFL context can learn about or gain exposure to in foreign language classrooms, the benefits of using authentic materials, such as TV programs, movies, and YouTube, were recommended by many students ( $n = 85$ ):

Don't simply listen to the same kind of English speakers all the time. Watch news, TV comedies and YouTube. Expose yourself to a variety of different accents, situations and topics. (Poor, ID: 230)

When I came to Australia, the Australian accent was unfamiliar to me. I remembered watching a lot of Australian TV shows and news on TV. When I was in the UK last semester for my exchange semester, I took quite sometimes to get used to the British accents. However, my strategy was to watch TV shows and movies from that particular countries. In other words, to get my ears familiarized with the accents of the region I am in. (Very good, ID: 336)

Again, 'real-life' English conversation was a preferred material for enhancing their comprehension skills. Students stated that listening to conversations of others within their learning sphere and social situations was useful comprehension practice. Hence, they proposed intentionally listening to others' English conversations regardless of where they were:

Overhear other people's conversations and how they sound . . . on the street, buses and wherever you are, and get used to different accents. (Very good, ID: 312)

Listen to other people speaking English (when on buses, trains wherever you go, just listen to people and learn) Keep your ears open. English is everywhere. (Good, ID: 95)

In addition, accent unfamiliarity cannot be the only cause of comprehension barriers: Underdeveloped vocabulary can be one of the major reasons. Therefore, students noted that building vocabulary banks is a critical strategy for helping them improve ( $n = 14$ ), proposing it as a strategy to support their challenges in comprehension:

Improve Your vocabulary. It will help you to understand different accents better. Sometimes, it's not always because of people's accent, but vocabulary. (Average, ID: 122)

In like manner, the potential effects of other factors on their comprehension, such as the speaker's voice quality or background noise, were pointed out by the students. However, they also believed that having a sound knowledge of vocabulary, along with accurate pronunciation, could support their comprehension:

Improve vocabulary. Accent, voice quality and sometimes noise interrupt our comprehension, but if we have good knowledge of vocabulary, it will be helpful. Know how to pronounce too. Learning vocabulary is one thing and using them is another. (Poor, ID: 126)

Comprehensive exposure to the target language as a strategy ( $n = 91$ ) was applied and suggested in order to become familiar with diverse accents and speech styles of English users. Participants' responses indicated that whether or not their conversation partner was L1, having comprehensive communication exposure was deemed important. Hence, they advised two different methods for creating social networks: including their neighbours and joining international student organisations and social events.

Establishing social networks within their neighbourhood, particularly with elderly people, was revealed as a useful strategy for enhancing students' comprehension skills because elderly people were willing to communicate with the students, and they also tended to teach or correct students' English:

Build relationships with your neighbours. There are some elderly people who like to talk to people like us. They love to correct your accent and vocabulary and also it will be helpful for you to understand their speech. (Good, ID: 37)

Sharing accommodation with people who did not share the same first language was also considered a strategy for developing comprehension skills in terms of accented English and management of the challenges. Furthermore, through extensive communication experience, students may feel less anxious when they encounter communication breakdowns:

Live with people who you have to speak English with. Meeting diverse people means you listen to diverse accents. You'll understand different accent or at least you won't be embarrassed just because you don't understand their accent. (Average, ID: 238)

Participating in a range of student organisations and social events was considered as a method to maximise exposure to diverse English accents and enhance comprehension skills:

Try to go international student organisation and talk international students. Put yourself out there, exposure to other accents. (Poor, ID: 147)

There are many events at uni. Whether Australian students or international students, talk to them and spend time with them. You will be able to understand them better. (Very good, ID: 56)

Open-mindedness ( $n = 52$ ) combined with a willingness to listen to diverse accented speakers and understand their phonological diversity was proposed as a strategy. English is a common means of communication for speakers from various first language backgrounds; thus, students' responses indicated that having positive attitudes to better understanding the presence of varieties of English spoken by L1 and L2 individuals is an imperative step in the international context:

Be open-minded to any English. Don't focus too much on how native English speakers speak. International communication is necessary these days, so it's important to have abilities to understand diverse accents. (Very good, ID: 307)

Understanding different accent is very important. Lecturers, tutors and even a lot of students have different accent. So be open-minded and don't avoid people with difficult accent, the first step is spending time and talking to them more often. (Good, ID: 259)

Understanding the main point ( $n = 11$ ) was considered a key strategy for comprehending what the speaker said. Students remarked that understanding every single detail of what the speaker was saying could be difficult, or unnecessary, because without understanding the main idea, nothing could make sense:

It's okay not to be able to understand everything. If it's not important, it's okay to let things go without showing that you don't understand. Try to understand the point of the conversation. (Poor, ID: 142)

It's difficult to understand everything when the accent is difficult. Listen to the words and try to get the main point from the speaker. (Average, ID: 206)

### Gender comparison

Descriptive analysis was carried out on both verbal and non-verbal strategies by gender. The number of strategies applied by females and males, with frequency and percentages, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Number of strategies used by females and males (N = 214)**

Variables	Number of strategies (%)			
	1	2	3	4
F ( $n = 110$ )	49 (44.5%)	43 (39.1%)	16 (14.6%)	2 (1.8%)
M ( $n = 104$ )	55 (52.9%)	35 (33.7%)	12 (11.5%)	2 (1.9%)

*Note.* Both verbal and non-verbal strategies are computed.

With strategies applied to mitigate barriers to comprehension, there were more females using multiple strategies than males. While 44.5% of females used a single strategy, followed by 39.1% using two strategies, more than half the males (52.9%) employed a single strategy and 33.7% of them used two strategies. Descriptive analysis further supported the observation of preferences in using different strategies between females and males, as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Number of frequencies of coping strategies by gender (N = 214)**

Verbal strategies	Frequencies (%)		Non-verbal strategies	Frequencies (%)	
	F ( $n = 110$ )	M ( $n = 104$ )		F ( $n = 110$ )	M ( $n = 104$ )
Meaning negotiation	50 (45.5)	43 (41.3)	Self-discipline	48 (43.6)	51 (49.0)
			Comprehensive exposure to the target language	48 (43.6)	43 (41.3)
Asking for slower speech pace	10 (9.1)	4 (3.8)	Open-mindedness	30 (27.3)	22 (21.2)
			Understanding the main point	5 (4.5)	6 (5.8)
Total	60	47		131	122

*Note.* Both female and male students applied non-verbal strategies more than verbal strategies, hence the total frequency is either lower or higher than the sample size. The percentages would not be equal to 100 as a large number of students employed more than a single strategy (see Table 1).

Both females and males preferred using non-verbal strategies to verbal strategies (131 and 122 instances respectively). Male students were dependent on self-discipline (49.0%) to facilitate their comprehension, followed by comprehensive exposure to the target language (41.3%). Nevertheless, both strategies were equally crucial for females (43.6%), followed by open-mindedness (27.3%). With a verbal attempt, both females (45.5%) and males (41.3%) favoured using meaning negotiation, although the instances were slightly higher in females.

Further statistical analysis was carried out to determine if there was a relationship between females and males' use of coping strategies. Given the violation of the equal variance assumption, Welch's t-test was performed; however, the differences were not big enough to reach statistical significance ( $t = 1.1$ ,  $df = 211.6$ ,  $p = 0.3$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Qualitative outcomes demonstrated that L2 East Asian students were resilient in response to comprehension barriers caused by accent unfamiliarity and that they used a broad range of strategies. Although females indicated more flexible attitudes than males in their response pattern (females: 191, males 169 in total), no significant differences were observed between gender groups. Strategies revealed by the thematic analysis were not observed but were self-identified strategies. Hence, the best options for facilitating comprehension issues could differ from the self-identified strategies. Given that the students were asked to complete self-report instruments and propose three "top tips" for future international students, it seems probable that the findings may present a mixture of self-identified strategies and best options.

Verbal strategies such as meaning negotiation and asking for slower speech pace were reported by all proficiency and gender groups. Unlike previous literature that has reported on strategies of silence and avoidance (Park, 2016), in this context, students acknowledged the importance of remaining in communication by attempting to reach mutual understanding. Details of applied strategies included a confirmation check, repetition, and clarification requests for a slower speech rate, which are forms of interactive refinement of understanding until a sufficient point of comprehension is reached. Meaning negotiation ultimately contributes to L2 students' linguistic advancement because they would receive comprehensive inputs and produce outputs by using their own words (Yi & Sun, 2013). While strategies such as silence as a means of communication for East Asian students are often used in interactive classroom settings so that they do not "stand out" or to avoid personal embarrassment (Dodgson et al., 2018), in Westernised classroom settings these strategies can be erroneously interpreted as disengagement or loss of interest. Therefore, future students were encouraged to employ different strategies to accomplish mutual understanding.

Among the non-verbal strategies used, the most frequent was self-discipline, which included the use of authentic materials and building vocabulary banks to support comprehension. In particular, students stressed the use of authentic materials such as TV programs, YouTube videos, and real-life conversations for familiarisation with the

phonological diversity of both L1 and L2 speakers. Comprehension can be challenging for new L2 students from the EFL context because of the myriad accents and speakers who have different voice qualities and who speak at different volumes and speeds in Australia. Although LOR in L2 environments can enhance different phonological units to a certain extent and raise awareness of the diversity that the English language encompasses, this may not be a feasible option for future students prior to their arrival in the host country. Alternatively, using authentic materials could help students to understand linguistic diversity and prepare them for potential challenges they may face upon arrival. Further, as confirmed by Ghaderpanahi (2012), authentic materials benefit L2 students by improving their overall comprehension and by accustoming them to different speech paces, accents, and even dialects that could impede their comprehension.

Students' responses suggested that their limited capacity to accommodate diverse accents and their lack of depth and breadth of vocabulary were two of the major factors contributing to their level of comprehensibility. As well as needing to build vocabulary banks to support their comprehension, future students were also encouraged to learn accurate pronunciation of vocabulary for the efficient use of vocabulary as a coping method in verbal communication. Nevertheless, students do not need to try their utmost to understand every meaning of every word, phrase, and sentence, which Yang (2019) argued is an unproductive learning behaviour of some EFL students. The students recommended that future students concentrate on understanding the main point or gist of the speakers' information. These strategies can better facilitate L2 students' comprehension to a substantial extent by assisting them to advance beyond their lexical level.

For both female and male students, non-verbal strategies associated with both self-discipline and increasing exposure to the target language appeared to be significant. In their responses, emphasis was placed on a natural acquisition setting, where they could pick up the language using both authentic and semi-authentic materials. During their study journey, they intentionally increased communicative exposure to the English language by pushing themselves to establish social networks inside and outside of university. Moving to English-speaking countries and living there for a longer period is not an optimal solution for complex linguistic issues and associated educational consequences. Conscious effort by students should be devoted to acquiring education in their L2. Unlike previous literature that found social interactions with hosts is a method for learning formal and informal English (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011), students in this study highlighted meaningful interactions and ties with diverse people, both L1 and L2, for dealing with the potential impacts of accent unfamiliarity and for increasing overall language fluency. Social interactions with diverse people in the international context would help reduce stereotypes and increase trust among people across cultural contexts, better preparing these students to successfully work in a globalised society.

### **Limitations of the study**

This qualitative study is not without weaknesses. The self-identified strategies may not be explicit descriptors of coping strategies for various reasons. Students may have forgotten to report some strategies they employed because the strategies they developed can be applied at both a conscious and subconscious level. Despite confirmation that self-reported listening skills are related to L2 students' comprehension barriers, their

self-reporting can be potentially biased and subject to reporting errors because their perceptions of their L2 skills can be subjective.

### **Implications for practice**

L2 speakers generally have more limited vocabulary and use simpler expressions without using slang or idiomatic expressions than L1 speakers. However, as students noted earlier, comprehension barriers occur for many reasons; for example, speech intelligibility of the speakers, background noise, or not enough information conveyed by the speakers. Moving beyond a discourse of deficit or viewing them from a deficit perspective, universities should create conditions that reinforce “enablers” that promote L2 students’ successful engagement in culturally complex environments and suppress existing “barriers”, which are imposed by their structures and practices and which may hamper the students’ social and academic well-being.

Universities should consider training all members of their community for intercultural communication to raise social awareness about intercultural sensitivity. In English-speaking universities, L2 students’ efforts to communicate with others are often taken for granted and they seem to carry with them a heavy communicative burden of responsibility. In a BBC news article entitled “Native English Speakers are the World’s Worst Communicators” (Morrison, 2016), Jennifer Jenkins argued that “it is native speakers that are having difficulty understanding and making themselves understood”, especially in an ELF situation. This is because L1 speakers may not feel that they need to accommodate, or adapt to, others. From the viewpoint of Byram (2020), positive attitudes such as curiosity, openness, and a readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement about others’ meaning and behaviours are “preconditions” for successful intercultural communication. Hence, it is important to recognise that effective communication does not concern L2 students’ speaking as unidirectional, but concerns listening and reaching a point of clear understanding altogether. The effectiveness of such training can be (a) a decrease in cultural differences, (b) acquisition of culturally competent knowledge, and (c) an increase in interactions between speakers across different countries.

Given the immense degree of language variation existing in English-speaking universities, other factors, such as accent unfamiliarity, different speech style or habits of diverse English speakers, the use of colloquialisms, and so forth cannot be completely ruled out as potential sources of linguistic barriers for L2 students. It is crucial to note that neither the language tests nor previous language learning are thoroughly designed to provide multiple layers of discipline-specific language and the complexities of local language varieties to directly meet their social and academic needs. As indicated in the Results section, students desire to be included with L1 students in both social and academic interactions. L2 students may be unfamiliar with and feel awkward in interactive classrooms, resulting in their interacting co-nationally or in culturally similar groups. Knowing that such problems exist, academics can support and guide students, focusing on teaching them how to collaborate with each other, thereby ensuring more productive learning outcomes. For example, they could be encouraged to find common ground, share background knowledge, use fewer colloquialisms such as slang and idiomatic expressions, and not speak too fast when they work and mix with students from diverse backgrounds. Instead of interpreting L2 students’ tendency to mumble and stutter as incompetence, they could deconstruct

meaning together through interactions with the help of words and expressions. In doing so, L2 students could feel that they are included and valued and hence become more comfortable participating in interactive classrooms.

Taken as a whole, consideration of ways to counter problems that undermine L2 students' international education experience and reconsideration of pedagogical practice can give rise to crucial differences in L2 students' learning experience, more than can be gained by simply increasing the entry language threshold, because it would directly assist them increase their self-esteem and confidence (Ryan & Viete, 2009).

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