

# Introduction

## What Can Be Discovered from Reading This Book

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*What Do International Students Think and Feel?* seeks to illuminate the lives of international students at colleges and universities in the United States. The goal of this book is to build the readers' awareness about what it means to adjust to another culture. The book, which is based on more than two decades of ongoing inquiry into the cultural adjustment process of international students studying in U.S. university language institutes and undergraduate and graduate programs, features a rich and varied assortment of personal narratives shared through the years by international students from countries all over the world.

These narratives include accounts of international students' dreams and goodbyes before moving to the United States to study; their initial experiences soon after arriving; their increasing involvement with Americans\* in and outside the classroom; and the myriad problems, issues, and challenges they encounter. This book is also about strategies that international students use to navigate a new culture—strategies that succeed and fail. It also includes accounts of students' experiences as they return to their homeland and have to readjust to their home culture—accounts that describe both the problems they face and also the awareness they have gained about themselves and their cultural values and behaviors.

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\*We are using *Americans* throughout this book because it is the term generally applied to people who live in the United States, even though we are aware that people living in other countries are also Americans. In this book, we are using it to refer only to people who live in the United States.

*What Do International Students Think and Feel?* includes narratives from international students from many different countries, including China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, India, Kenya, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Grenada, Cuba, Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Germany, England, France, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and other countries. Through these personal narratives, readers can hear about the cultural adjustment process of international students in their own words.



## Who Can Benefit from Reading This Book

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The primary audience for this book is students who are studying in TESOL programs in North America. This book can be used in an Introduction to TESOL class, an Intercultural Communication class, or any course that incorporates the cultural adaptation experiences of international students in the United States. This book can also be valuable to ESL teachers who are teaching at language institutes, university liberal arts programs with international students, or other courses and programs with an international student population.

*What Do International Students Think and Feel?* can be useful as part of an international student orientation program and as a resource in an international center. Newly arrived students can benefit from hearing the perspectives of international students who have preceded them. The book can help students gain an understanding of the basic process of adaptation, consider their own issues related to cultural adaptation, and weigh suitable approaches to their new surroundings.

This book can also be used as part of a program outside the United States to prepare university exchange, scholarship, and other program students and professionals who plan to study and live in the United States. Most programs that prepare people to study abroad typically offer them opportunities to strengthen their academic reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. This book will add another needed skill

area—understanding the concepts of cultural values, behaviors, perceptions, and strategies related to cultural adaptation.

Because one of the aims of this book is to reveal what it means to be an international student through the perspectives of students on a university campus, this book could be adapted to any academic course that seeks to sensitize American undergraduate and graduate students to the lives of international students. It could also be a catalyst for American students (and teachers/professors) not only to expand their perceptions about the lives of international students, but also to become more involved in supporting them as they face culturally based academic and social challenges.

## **Qualitative Research: Design and Methodology**

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This book is based on more than twenty years of research into the lives of international students studying at American colleges and universities. From the beginning of this project, I was fortunate to work with graduate assistants, and over the years I trained and worked with both American and international students (from China, Ghana, Grenada, Hungary, India, Kenya, Korea, Poland, Nepal, Senegal, Taiwan, and Thailand). Some of these research assistants, who are acknowledged on page v, worked with me for several years and were invaluable. They were able to elicit deeply moving stories (narratives) from classmates, friends, and themselves about their cultural adaptation experiences. Although I also developed close trusting relationships with a variety of international students and gained privileged access to stories about their lives, some of the international student researchers, as insiders, were able to gain greater access to cultures and people.

We used a Qualitative Research design and methodology, making use of a variety of sources and research experiences (Agar, 1980, 1996; Baker, 2004; Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2005; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Lincoln, 1995; Maxwell, 2004; Pagnucci, 2004; Richards, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Rule & Wheeler, 2000;

Spradely, 1979) to understand the cultural adaptation experiences of the international students. The research was conducted at several universities in the students' natural settings, such as in university dorms, libraries, classrooms, cafeterias, international student clubs, and Internet chat rooms, as well as in supermarkets, coffee shops, apartments, subways, and other places on and off campus that international students frequent.

The goal of our research was to describe, analyze, and consider multiple interpretations of what the descriptions might mean (Fanselow, 1988, 1997). We collected descriptions through a variety of qualitative research techniques, including conversations with international students and their teachers and friends over time (some over months), informal structured interviews (taped), and group discussions. We also asked students to write essays and short stories about their cultural adaptation experiences, had ongoing email correspondence with some, and kept field notes on observations of international students as they circulated in the university community.

I analyzed the collection of descriptions over time, and coupled with a review of the literature (Gebhard, 2010), I was able to understand and categorize the experiences of the international students, as well as identify complexity and issues within the adaptation process (Part 3). I was also able to recognize and categorize international student behaviors that seemed to impede successful adaptation (Part 4), as well as strategies that seem to work for them (Part 5).

As a part of the research process, my research assistants and I asked each person to complete a Human Subjects Consent Form that granted permission to publish their narratives. As a part of this human subject contract between the students and me, I promised not to disclose their names along with their narratives.



## How This Book Is Organized

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*What Do International Students Think and Feel?* includes six themes or parts. Part 1, Challenges International Students Face, explores the types of challenges that confront international students as they attempt

to adapt to a different culture (Chapter 1). This first chapter also provides a foundation for gaining a deeper understanding of the themes and narratives in Parts 2–6.

Part 2, *The Basic Phases of Cultural Adaptation*, includes five chapters, each one describing a different phase of cultural adjustment. The phases include preparing to leave the home country for the United States (Chapter 2), initial experiences in the United States (Chapter 3), increasing interaction and challenges (Chapter 4), culture shock (Chapter 5), and adaptation to life in the United States (Chapter 6). Each chapter presents adaptation narratives told through the words of the international students or the Americans who interact with them.

Part 3, *Beyond Phases: The Complexity of Cultural Adaptation*, explains why cultural adaptation should not simply be understood as a series of phases. One reason is because cultural adaptation is a dynamic process; international students do not necessarily move from one phase to the next in a linear progression. For example, some students have culture shock soon after arriving, while others believe they have successfully adjusted initially, only to find themselves regressing to an earlier phase (Chapter 7). Cultural adaptation is also complex because international students continue to have value conflicts and identity issues even after being in the United States for some time (Chapter 8).

Part 4, *Behavior That Can Encumber Successful Adaptation*, highlights behaviors that some international students have used that are not conducive to successfully adjusting to a new culture, such as complaining and avoiding interactions with Americans (Chapter 9), and expecting Americans to adapt to the international student's home-culture way of interacting, and withdrawing into the expatriate community (Chapter 10).

Part 5, *Strategies and Successful Adaptation*, contains four chapters on strategies that international students find useful in adapting to the university and larger community culture. These strategies include using humor and optimism (Chapter 11), using observation and matching behaviors (Chapter 12), doing and reflecting (Chapter 13), and finding support (Chapter 14).

Part 6, *Home Again—Readapting and Reflections on Living Abroad*, includes international students' reflections on their experiences in the

United States. Narratives include the types of problems and difficult decisions that international students face when they return home (Chapter 15) and the awareness and understanding that they have gained (Chapter 16).

Each of the six parts ends with a set of Reflective Questions for readers to consider. These questions are provided in the interest of provoking reflection and discussion. Readers can answer these questions alone or share answers with other readers as a stimulus for further considering the book's narratives and six themes.

### **A Note about the Author's Intentions**

My intention in writing this book is to illuminate the lives of international students who are studying at colleges and universities in the United States and, through their narratives, to build readers' awareness about what it means to adapt to another culture. My intention is in no way to imply that international students should try to become acculturated into the United States.

### **A Note about the Narratives: Voice and Editing**

I have done my best to maintain the original voices of the international students and other participants within each of the narratives included in this book. While some international students used English at a very advanced level, others' use of English was more basic, and most students' English was somewhere in between. As a result, when the intended meaning of the student was not clear, I attempted to clarify the English without changing the original meaning.

Readers are invited to sit with these students to learn about their experiences in living and studying in the United States.