

# WHY THEY STRUGGLE: A RESEARCH-TEACHING PROJECT HIGHLIGHTING CHALLENGES FACED BY MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS IN U.S. UNIVERSITIES

Panathip Chimrak, Nadiah binti Mohamed Hasnol, Juhua Huang,  
and Apichaya Thaneerat | Michigan State University

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U.S. institutions of higher education should go beyond statistical diversity to ensure inclusion and equity in the classroom environment—treating multilingual students fairly, being mindful of their varied cultural norms, and giving them the best possible opportunities for success. Our project supports these goals, as we brought together writing faculty and a group of four multilingual students to make videos for use in faculty workshops. Based on scholarly research and our own experiences, each of our three completed videos addresses the concerns of international students in the classroom, including the listening, speaking, and writing barriers they face. This paper also describes why we chose video specifically as the tool by which to convey our concerns.

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## INTRODUCTION

This project started at Michigan State University (MSU), a globally diverse institution that welcomes approximately 6,263 international students each year. At the time this project was conceived, the number of international students at our institution was relatively robust: statistics for 2019 show that MSU had 4,265 international students from 140 countries so that as many as 1 in every 13 undergraduates was from another country—with the majority being from China, but also from Thailand, South Korea, India, and countries in South America (“Statistical Report”). Though the pandemic and other factors have contributed to a reduction in these

numbers, the university is committed to bringing in more international students again in the future as part of its global mission.

The following study addresses ongoing problems faced by MSU and other institutions as they work to recruit and support these students. In this project, our small group of multilingual undergraduates, representing a variety of majors and countries of origin, has been working since 2019 with two writing professors at MSU to raise faculty knowledge of the difficulties faced by international students. Supported for the first two years by a university inclusivity grant, then by departmental funding, the group, known as the Multilingual Learners Team, has created a series of short videos and shared them with faculty and

staff. In addition, reaching beyond our institution, we have presented our work at regional and national conferences. The main focus of our team's research is to go beyond statistical diversity to help ensure inclusion in the classroom environment and equity -- treating international as well as U.S. students fairly, mindful of their varied cultural norms, and giving them the best possible opportunities for success.

Throughout the project, our team utilized two methodological approaches: a translanguaging approach and a participant-observer approach. Practitioners of a translanguaging approach argue for the successful communication of meaning via other elements (e.g., visual, auditory, body language) besides alphabetic text, while a participant-observer approach recognizes researchers who are both the producers of a proposed project and the participants/objects of the research itself. In conveying the experiences and observations of our undergraduate participant-researcher team, our Multilingual Learners Team found video to be a proper tool, as it has the potential to immerse a viewer in the realities of an international student's plight more fully than an article, or alphabetic text, can. Thus, we explain our two approaches at greater length here (including an explanation of why we chose video as the tool by which to convey our challenges as multilingual students); then we introduce the specific videos along with the issues each depicts; finally, after describing some of our team's challenges, we propose takeaways for our readers.

## **BACKGROUND: CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

The following review addresses ongoing problems faced by MSU and other institutions as they work to recruit and support international students—challenges that our project addresses. According to previous studies, linguistic and cultural limitations, academic and financial difficulties, interpersonal issues, racial prejudice, loss of social support, alienation, and homesickness can all pose significant hurdles for international students (Yeh and Inose). In addition, these students may feel more alienated than domestic students due to greater cultural shifts and less access to social and emotional support (Hechanova-Alampay et al.; Klomegah; Pedersen).

In-classroom challenges of international students include group separation, linguistic negotiation, and cultural differences. “Group separation” refers to the tendency for both domestic and international students to isolate themselves rather than interact with one another, particularly when completing group work (Medved et al.). Student-to-student interactions are crucial in instilling confidence in the classroom. International students may think negatively when their classmates are not interested in or supportive of each other's comments. Students' communication anxiety or dread may be exacerbated by such negative ideas, reducing their probability of speaking out in class (Hsu and Huang).

Further, the challenges that international students face due to language barriers and cultural differences cannot be ignored.

Students' backgrounds and cultures influence the way they express themselves in their papers (Vyncke), while restrictive conventions and normative structures of essay genres can inhibit and limit the expression of student writers (Lee). As a result, instructors do not always consider how the demands placed on international students may have an impact on a student's learning achievement (Liu et al.).

Moreover, classroom apprehension and desire to speak up in class are influenced by teacher confirmation actions. The more favorable interactions international students have with their teacher and classmates, regardless of the duration of their stay in the United States or class size, the more confident they feel while speaking English (Hsu and Huang). Due to language and cultural constraints, international students may have difficulty getting their turn to speak, so they remain silent. Because student-to-student interactions are crucial in instilling confidence in international students when they participate in class, such students may feel alienated if their U.S. peers do not support their opinions. This results in such views in the international student's mind as "my ideas are not welcome" and "my accent is difficult to understand." These negative attitudes may exacerbate international students' communication anxiety or apprehension, reducing their willingness to speak up in class (Hsu and Huang).

This research has greatly informed the videos the team has made on the challenges faced by international students in the classroom and how faculty might address these. In the next

two sections, we will explain the two main methodologies underlying our project.

## **METHODOLOGY I: TRANSLINGUAL APPROACHES**

In doing the work, the Multilingual Learners Team has drawn on theories of translanguaging, which challenge the use of Standard Written English (Edited American English) that is so widely spread across academic institutions in the United States. Leading translanguaging scholars identify several issues with continuing this practice. According to Horner and colleagues, Standard Written English ignores different usages of language in different genres and environments; as a result, language practices of particular groups are portrayed as "substandard" or "deviant" ("Language Difference"). Confining a form of language to a specific place or time violates the rights of a student to use their home language as a resource in an academic context. Moreover, Horner et al. maintain that a focus only on Standard English assumes complete mastery of English in students regardless of the context and their linguistic backgrounds ("Language Difference"). In this view, perfect proficiency in a language and the notion of language as a finite study is a false belief that many language learners and teachers maintain. As language skills can vary depending on the situation and environment, the idea of achieving mastery in Standard Written English is nearly impossible for both native and non-native English speakers. Finally, this traditional mindset of language learning disregards the flexibility of English and other languages. As Vivian Zamel

argues, such an adherence to the strictures of Standard English does not acknowledge how, in reality, languages and cultures develop and change (350). Drawing on these scholars, we assert that teachers and learners should aim for a translingual approach.

Extending translingual theories, Kiernan et al. emphasize the delivery of meaning instead of the perfect usage of grammar. Instructors are encouraged to search for meaning and ask for clarity to promote a supportive environment for all students: an environment where different language variations are celebrated and utilized as an asset by students and instructors (Kiernan et al.). We also align ourselves with Horner and colleagues, who argue for honoring the power of all language users to shape language to specific ends, recognizing the linguistic heterogeneity of all users of language both within the United States and globally, and directly confronting English monolingual expectations by researching and teaching how writers can work with and against, not simply within, those expectations (“Language Difference”). By searching for meaning instead of judging a text based on deviations from the norm, a translingual approach can facilitate interactions between English speakers and other language users to introduce different variations of English. In a recent article in *Young Scholars in Writing*, “Best Practices for a Translingual Pedagogy: An Undergraduate Perspective,” Jacob Wilson deplors “the fact that little has been done to bring translingual theory into classrooms” (97). Our work responds to this lack by conducting research about diversity and then by sharing the team’s

findings, partly through video format and partly through pedagogy workshops, to help instructors welcome and include international students in their classes.

The team’s research suggests that the production of videos to convey these approaches directly speaks to the core of a translingual approach that honors the diverse home languages of students, as well as the multiplicity of means by which people communicate with one another (outside of just alphabetic text). Recognizing that people use all the means at their disposal to communicate and negotiate meaning with one another (Canagarajah, “Crossing Borders”), scholars have called for a tighter link between translingualism and transmodality (Horner et al., *Translinguality*). The usage of both visual and audio components effectively conveys meaning and serves as a form of language in itself, including sound effects, facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. As these components are more universally understood by all audiences, the combination of the visual and audio keys serves as a form of language. Moreover, video allows our team to show what an international student might be *thinking* in the moment in response to challenging classroom and learning moments in a way that other modalities, such as a scholarly article, cannot do. Thus, our recognition of the “trans-” in transmodality aligns with this other aspect of scholars’ thinking on translingual pedagogy.

## METHODOLOGY II: PARTICIPANT-OBSERVERS

The researchers drew on participant-observer methods in our project: we are simultaneously subjects of the study and makers of proposed change. The project was originally inspired by an interview with international students and first-year writing professors regarding potential issues of language barriers and cultural differences. Our team was interested in further investigation into these issues and began by brainstorming ideas based on personal experiences along with researching issues faced by the majority of international students. Our team decided to present from the students' perspectives and communicate directly to professors. In other words, we drew on our own experiences as international students in making the videos for this project.

The Multilingual Learners Team consists of four international students and four faculty: two first-year writing professors, with occasional support from two teachers from the English Learning Center, the campus department that teaches students English as a Second Language. The team has overcome the challenges of crossing geographical, linguistic, cultural and disciplinary boundaries in a fully collaborative work. We strongly believe that our project has the potential to show how student-faculty teams of this kind can empower students and give them a voice while creating a resource that reveals unexpected facets of the "hidden classroom," such as the ways that students rely on their cell phones or consult each other for supplemental information, or even what they

think to themselves as the teacher lectures or gives out an assignment.

In addition, presenting the completed videos in workshops and conferences provides our team's participant-researchers with the opportunity to interact directly with the faculty in our university and beyond. The workshops create an open and interactive environment for instructors to discuss with the student team regarding our research findings and further inquiries. Faculty participants are encouraged to reflect on their own interactions with international students and their initial responses to them. In turn, the researchers are able to engage in live discussions among the teachers and conduct participant research by recording faculty responses to certain questions posed by the videos. Below, we analyze the distinctive affordances of the video format in conveying pedagogical dilemmas and solutions to a faculty audience.

## WHY VIDEO IS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL

Our team considered several media in deciding how best to deliver our message from international students' perspectives to faculty audiences. Video is a modality that communicates its contents through picture, animation, sound, and voice, as well as just text. According to research by Stephan Schwan and Roland Riempp, interactive dynamic visualizations allow the users to adapt their form and content to their individual cognitive skills and needs; interactive videos should, therefore, lead to more efficient forms of learning. Even though our videos are not fully interactive, the Multilingual Learners team embeds these

videos within interactive pedagogy sessions for teachers and exercises and activities on the [iteach.msu.edu](http://iteach.msu.edu) site where the videos are housed so that faculty audience members have ample opportunity to engage with the material after they watch each video. It is also convenient for the audiences to access the videos anytime and anywhere, without necessarily participating in the workshops themselves; the videos are fully shareable on various platforms.

The Multilingual Learners team titled our series of videos by starting with the phrase “Why Won’t They...”, asking questions about international students from the perspective of our classroom professors. Indeed, the themes of all three videos start from the teacher’s perspective, then turn to the personal experiences of students, thus “making real” for an imagined teacher-audience the students’ perspectives and responses. Each video provides pedagogical solutions to the challenges; each has high potential as a tool for teachers working with this particular group of students.

Thus, video has been an effective tool to communicate the international student perspective and to immerse the audience in specific students’ plights. Our team believes that while watching the video, the professor-audience can visualize and connect with another side of the classroom—the side of the international student that they might not otherwise be aware of—and they can better understand the answer to the question “Why Won’t They?” To show what happens in the hidden scene in the classroom from international students’ perspective and to see what problems international students encounter during their classes, the

research team also decided to divide the video into two main parts: the first part incorporates storytelling, using cartoon animation that shows international students’ challenges, and the second part gives suggestions to the professor-audience on how they can improve their teaching methods.

Furthermore, our team purposefully chose to use cartoon characters throughout the video rather than actors, as we reasoned that this approach would be less likely to offend any particular viewer. The animation lends itself to a playful tone, which can further engage viewers in accepting the sometimes difficult messages conveyed through the video. Proposing suggestions for the teacher, the second part of the video takes a more serious tone, though, and employs cognitive tools that allow the audience to take away important lessons they can employ in their teachings.

The three videos are particularly effective because of the opportunities they provide, nested as they are within faculty workshops, for the teacher-audience members to imagine how their teaching might actually change as a result of the information provided in the video. Fiorella and colleagues argue that when learning from narrated video lessons with complex diagrams, students benefit most from viewing dynamically generated drawings and then verbally explaining what they have learned. The videos do something similar for faculty audiences because the workshops in which they are set give faculty participants the opportunity to discuss the ideas being suggested. The audiences not only receive the suggestions and tips listed by text (part 2 of the video) but also

bring away the whole concept and understanding of the problem from the storytelling (part 1), which is a particular benefit of using video.

The effectiveness of the technique employed—cartoon videos embedded within faculty professional development opportunities—has been realized through multiple workshops and conferences. Our team received copious feedback stating that the video helps participants understand the challenges faced by international students in U.S. classrooms while offering suggestions and tips for the teacher to use. Comparing pre- and post-reactions of the faculty participants demonstrates the power and impact of these videos. Indeed, post-surveys indicate that something like  $2/3$  of workshop participants found the combination of video/workshops most helpful. The purpose of the post-surveys is mainly formative assessment for the team, as it consistently assesses the effect of the video/workshops on its targeted audience of teachers in order to further improve and evolve the most effective approach to deliver the content. Moreover, in return, the research team's post-surveys have also provided helpful feedback toward the contents of future projects.

## THE VIDEOS—A DETAILED INTRODUCTION

The first video, “Why Won’t They Understand My Lecture?” (see fig. 1), shows a simulated classroom scenario where the professor uses American football to illustrate an economics lesson. The topic derived both from an incident that a former team member (and international student) described experiencing in

his economics class and from discussions that two of the team’s faculty members (one current, one past) had had with other teachers from across the curriculum. The resulting video suggests that while this technical (football) vocabulary will seem familiar to U.S. students, it may not be so obvious to international students. As discussed in the video, it is common for professors to choose American sports as an example to make an analogy to new knowledge, but this is helpful only for U.S. students. International students who are unfamiliar with American sports culture have to spend more time to understand *two* subjects: not just the content knowledge in economics class but also American football. Many international students are unfamiliar with American football, so the video advises that teachers avoid choosing examples that not everyone knows and, instead, be more mindful of the students’ different backgrounds and/or choose analogies that will be more common to *all* of the students (for instance, comparing the variability of the supply/demand curve to something that is already part of the class itself, like an upcoming larger class assignment that will necessitate student adjustments of their schedules).

As suggested earlier, much has been written about the cultural challenges international students face, both in and out of the classroom (Hechanova-Alampay et al.; Klomegah; Pedersen; Yeh and Inose). Our team’s first video emphasizes the cultural alienation that international students might face in the classroom setting. The video also draws on Anthony Robbins’s notion of the “learning edge momentum,” that is, that students’ success in acquiring one

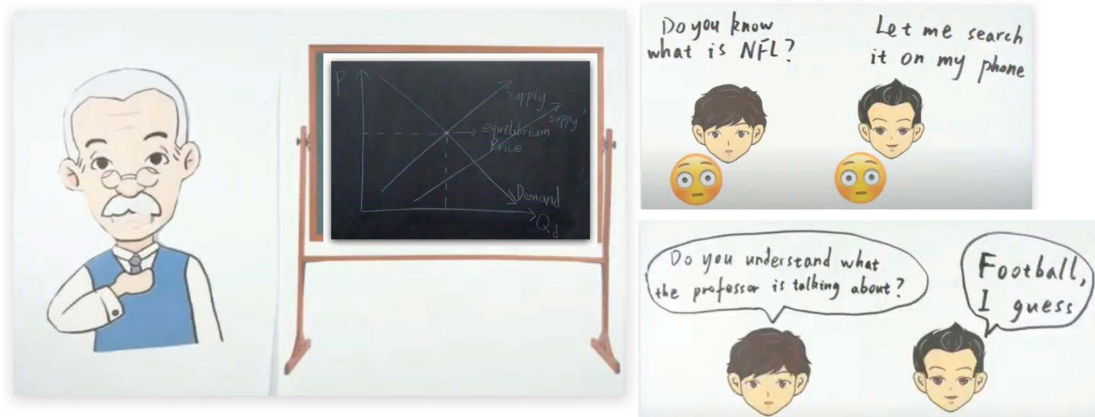


Fig. 1. Screenshot from video “Why Won’t They Understand My Lecture?”

concept makes learning other closely linked concepts easier (37). But such momentum is only possible when new ideas are put into relationship with already familiar ones— a situation that is not readily possible when the instructor places new information (e.g., economics theory) in relation to what is other new information for the international student (e.g., U.S. football).

Our team’s second video details the professor’s confusion about “Why Won’t They Talk?” (see fig. 2). This film looks at issues of in-class participation from the perspective of international students—a topic we identified from the faculty survey we completed after publishing and sharing the first video. The survey results indicated that a major problem from the teachers’ views appeared to be that international students keep quiet in class; from a professor’s perspective, they wanted international student interaction and participation. As the research suggests, such teachers might erroneously conclude that silence

equals disengagement (Kim et al.). However, from international students’ perspective, they encounter difficulties in being involved in the classroom due to the language barrier. In presenting the student’s perspective, our team’s subsequent video heightens faculty awareness and gives suggestions for creating a more welcoming, culturally responsive environment for all students. The video starts by showing the professor asking for a text to be read live in class; the difference in reading efficiency between domestic and international students is ignored to the point that students whose first language is not English do not have enough time to respond. This video’s focus on one reason why international students might not speak readily in classroom situations (e.g., not being given enough time to read, understand, and respond) aligns with the work of a number of scholars (Rao; Yildirim; Zheng). This video proposes the teacher scaffold coursework by providing more materials to students before class and giving them more time to prepare



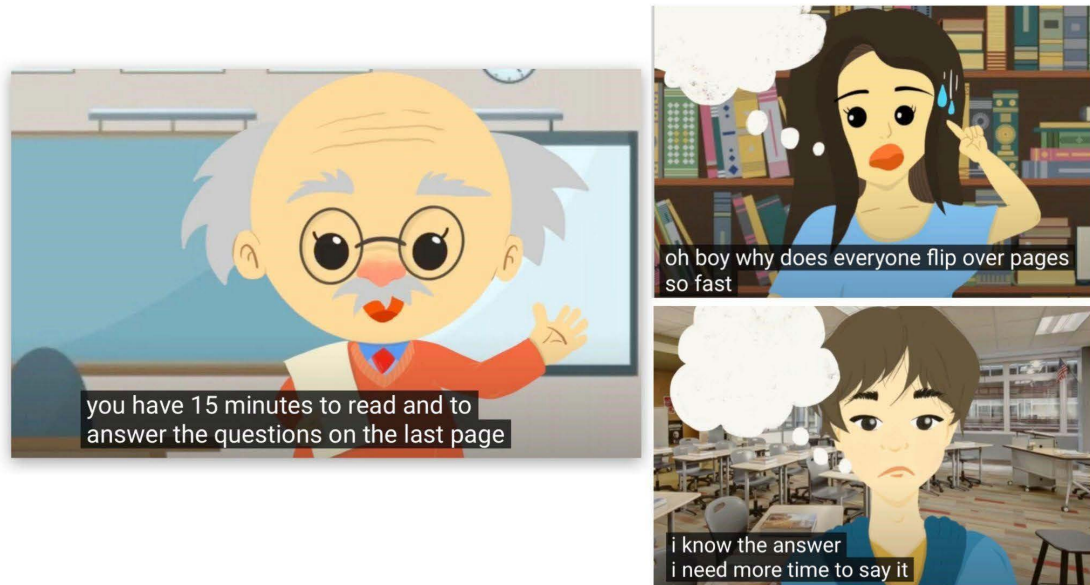


Fig. 2. Screenshot from video “Why Won’t They Talk?”

responses when oral participation is expected in class. For teachers who are wondering why international students might not talk in their classes, this video builds on scholarship that elucidates this challenge for international students and proposes a range of solutions.

The team’s third video, “Why Won’t They Write Grammatically?” (see fig. 3), challenges Eurocentric assumptions about “standard” and “native-speaker” English and complicates grammar-only corrective responses to student writing by illustrating the most common grammatical “interferences” affecting international students. The origin of this video was in the faculty members’ experience of other teachers despairing over the grammatical mistakes they saw in international student writing. By observing their reactions to the students’

English, we were able to brainstorm the title “Why Won’t They Write Grammatically?” In the video, an international student is stunned to receive a paper that has been heavily marked in red for correction because, coming from a home language with no verb tenses or articles, he omits or confuses these in English. As this video demonstrates, for writers using English as a second, third, or even fourth language, the requirement that this student produce perfect Standard English is overwhelming. This video’s focus is supported by scholarship on international students’ challenges with teachers who focus too rigidly or generally on grammar mistakes, penalizing the student for errors without providing necessary focused instruction on a specific grammatical issue. In his article, “The Written Corrective Feedback Debate:

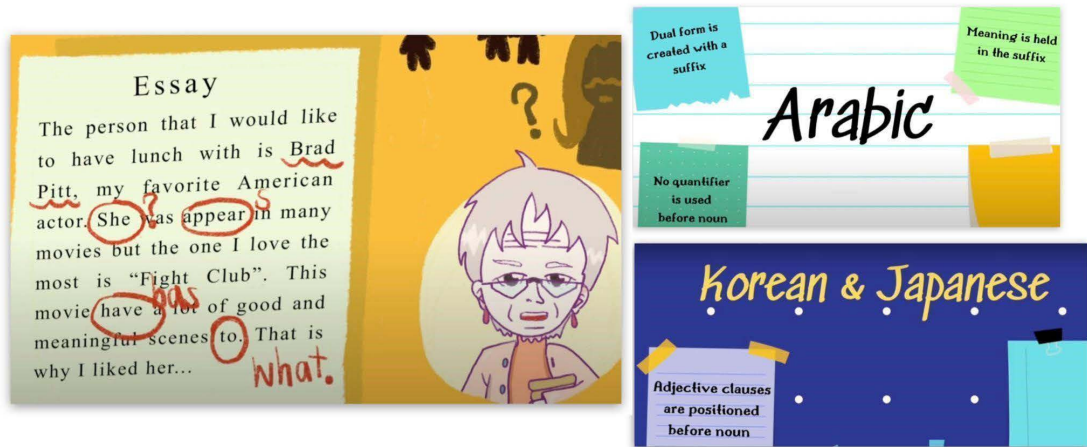


Fig. 3. Screenshot from video “Why Won’t They Write Grammatically?”

Next Steps for Classroom Teachers and Practitioners,” Dan Brown argues for the effectiveness of providing written corrective feedback to improve grammatical accuracy; our video reflects Brown’s perspective by suggesting that teachers only mark what they teach, or are prepared to teach.

In “Translanguaging in the classroom: Emerging issues for research and pedagogy,” Suresh Canagarajah states that “Multilingual users’ linguistic variations are treated as marking their nonstandard or deficient usage, resulting from ‘interference’ from the other languages in their repertoire, and conditioned by their first language or culture not to accommodate a second language effectively” (23). As suggested in our video, a teacher may be unaware of the normal ways that home languages can emerge in Standard English writing, and so may penalize the student for such so-called “interference.” For this reason, the video questions views and practices of linguistic bias and

promotes culturally-sustaining, asset-based pedagogies that support the richly diverse languages and cultures of international students. The third video thus addresses key grammatical differences between English and other languages, such as Mandarin or Thai, in order to ‘naturalize’ and explain the instances in which aspects of students’ home languages may occur in their English writing. This video thus encourages instructors to focus on the big picture instead of minor grammar mistakes made by international students. This video concludes with several alternate assessments that a writing teacher might use when evaluating international students’ work. The team’s main goal is to promote understanding and highlight the struggle of learning English as a second language to the teaching faculty. “Why Won’t They Write Grammatically?” is the result of combining our voices and suggestions regarding this issue. We hope that viewers are able to sympathize with international students and

utilize the advice provided in and beyond their own classrooms as they continue to strive for an inclusive learning environment.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, when international students are given the floor, they have valuable insights to share about their classroom experiences. While our team is still in the process of developing more videos, the existing project speaks to the affordances of involving students themselves in the process of articulating and naming their own challenges and proposing solutions. Our team strongly believes that voicing up the stakeholders' opinions is the most effective solution to the issues we describe here, as this move provides opportunities to generate student/teacher dialogues based on international student perspectives that the professors may not see. Furthermore, subsequent teacher-student dialogues occur, as our team will develop its future videos in response to comments from the targeted audiences (the professors) that participate in *prior* workshops. This ongoing dialogue involving both teachers and students greatly enriches our work, as we have seen through our engagement in multiple face-to-face workshops and conferences within our university and beyond.

Despite our successes, we see this project very much in process, as our project continues within a series and is ongoing. Instructors are encouraged to utilize the videos and this article to understand a fraction of international students' points of view, enhance teaching and learning ability in their own classrooms, and get more involved in discussing issues through

our YouTube channel or other platforms. The feedback is highly valuable to the researcher team as we continue with a new topic series: one that addresses the issue of microaggressions that the international student may experience in small-group and peer work with U.S. students, and a second video on cultural differences that affect international students' understanding of plagiarism and the ownership of intellectual property.

Finally, the project demonstrates that video may be an especially useful tool for an international *lingua franca* that levels some of the power differentials to communicate on a basis of equality between teachers and students, native and non-native speakers. The videos, along with interactive faculty workshops, have the potential to raise awareness for faculty and make a difference in student success. For future creators, the team would like to suggest that forming a group of people with common interests and letting the team identify topics of study would be the best approach to present any future projects. For our colleagues—professors and students alike—we cite as takeaways the value of a cross-rank project at our own institution, where we as students had a voice in shaping the articulation of both the problems students like ourselves encounter in our learning and the “solutions” that could address these issues. We have a highly collaborative team that has developed strong, positive working relationships, which spill over into the multiple presentations we have given based on our research and videos. We thus urge that other institutions invite students and teachers to similarly collaborate on such projects that

permit those most affected to state their concerns in a manner that is intentionally supportive and collegial, rather than critical. In an increasingly isolated world, where entire groups of people may be pitted against one another, such communication and collaboration, along with the co-creation of art-pieces that make the concerns of one group so visible to others, is all the more important.

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