Journey of Myanmar Postgraduate Students: Overcoming Language Barriers and Academic Challenges during Study Abroad Programs in Thailand

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Abstract

Since the military coup in early 2021, many Myanmar students have sought study abroad opportunities worldwide including Thailand, which is geographically the closest country in Southeast Asia. This research examines the experiences of these Myanmar students regarding their language barriers, and academic challenges during their studies in Thailand. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 postgraduate students from nine Thai universities, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that language problems primarily stemmed from locals' reluctance to use English and students' lack of local language proficiency, leading to a feeling of being outsiders within the local community. Beyond linguistic barriers, differences in educational standards, academic resources, and the students' lack of standardized academic practices posed additional challenges. Nonetheless, students showed positive sociocultural adaptation by learning Thai, utilizing translation tools and relying on non-verbal interactions. Additionally, support from teachers and peers, and consistent self-study efforts, contribute to their academic adaptation.

Keywords: sociocultural adaptation, academic adaptation, Myanmar postgraduate students, study abroad

Adapting to a new educational environment can be challenging (Yu & Wright, 2024). While research on international students has focused on English speaking countries such as the US, UK, and Australia, which have the most international students (OECD, 2013), some have examined the experiences of international students in non-English speaking countries (Jon et al., 2014). Unlike those in English speaking countries, many students in non-English speaking countries are unable to communicate in the local language, posing difficulties when they go out in public. For instance, international students in Thailand and China have trouble engaging with locals due to language barriers (Chaiyasat, 2020; Moe, 2021). In response to such communication challenges, Vietnamese students found that learning the local language from Thai friends improved their local

language skills and integration (Srisakda, 2018). In contrast, despite foundational Thai classes, American visiting scholars often used translation applications to bridge the language gap (Rybo-LoPresti & Rhein, 2021). These students, who typically form closer social ties with co-national peers and had fewer social contacts with locals, showed more sociocultural adjustment issues.

Beyond daily interactions, a new academic culture may also challenge international students' primary aim to achieve academic progress. For example, the traditional emphasis on rote learning in Myanmar does not prepare students for the open discussion and student-centered learning typical of international education. Additionally, the military rulers have not adequately funded education in Myanmar, so schools lack resources, qualified teachers, and updated curricula. Rote memorization has been emphasized rather than critical thinking (Kende-Robb, 2017). Although the government of the National League for Democracy (NLD) (2015–2020) introduced the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) to emphasize a student-centered approach, there have been other challenges, including an overemphasis on rote learning, outdated curricula, and insufficient funding (Phyu, 2022). Political instability in Myanmar has made reforms in higher education difficult (Phyu, 2022) and has made adapting to international academic settings more challenging.

In recent years, political tension, and objections to higher education, have caused a surge in the number of Myanmar students in Thailand (RFA, 2021). Students have sought higher quality education, improved career prospects, and an escape from Myanmar's political and economic instability. Many relocate to Thailand with little time to prepare for the linguistic and academic changes they will face, which may make it difficult to adapt. Myanmar and Thailand share similar cultural norms, such as the practice of Theravada Buddhism and traditional events rooted in Buddhist culture, including water festivals and light festivals (Helbardt et al., 2013). However, their bilateral relation since the Ayatthaya period in the 18th century is complex (Rhein, 2016). Despite the historical conflicts, Thailand today has become a place for many Myanmar refugees and immigrants seeking shelter and employment (Sunpuwan & Niyomsilpa, 2012). Most existing research on the Myanmar population in Thailand has not focused on higher education, but on the children of migrant workers and their acquisition of the Thai language, education in government schools, and integration into the community (Arphattananon, 2022; Stange & Sasiwongsaroj, 2020). While research on Myanmar students in Thai higher education remains limited, some studies have explored the social and culture experiences of Vietnamese, Chinese and French students (Qian et al., 2017; Srikrai et al., 2016). One of the earliest studies on Myanmar students in Thai higher education was conducted by Rhein (2016), who examined the sociocultural adaptation of Myanmar students, emphasizing the influence of past historical tensions between Myanmar and

Thailand. More recently, Rhein and Jones (2020) explored the impact of ethnicity on the sociocultural adaptation of international students, including Myanmar, in a Thai university. To expand the breadth and depth of international students' experiences in Thai universities, this research examines the challenges Myanmar graduate students face in terms of language barriers and academic challenges in Thailand and how they have adapted. The study addresses two research questions.

      1. How do Myanmar postgraduate students experience language barriers and academic challenges in international programs in Thailand?

      2. What strategies have Myanmar postgraduate students used to improve their language skills and adapt to new academic settings in Thailand?

Literature Review

The literature review covers language barriers, academic challenges, and cross-cultural adaptation, focusing on communication issues, educational differences, and strategies for sociocultural, psychological, and academic adaptation.

Language Barriers

Poor language skills make it difficult for international students to adapt to their new environment. This language barrier hampers academic performance, professional development, and everyday experience (Rivas et al., 2019). EFL students fear their lack of language skill will be exposed in the classroom, and many will not interact in the second language (Pattapong, 2015). In non-English speaking countries, international students may have trouble among English speakers in the classroom. Furthermore, studies have noted the importance of local language skills for daily interactions in the community. Proficiency in the local language is necessary for students in order to make friends and gain a sense of belonging that is essential to cross-cultural adjustment (Stange & Sasiwongsaroj, 2020). Mohsin and Naseem (2018) showed that the lack of Chinese proficiency prevented international students from interacting with locals. Similarly, Moe (2021) stated that Myanmar postgraduate students at a Chinese university struggled with the local language, especially in daily interactions, resulting in feelings of stress and insecurity. Recently, Yu and Wright (2024) reported that international students in Hong Kong struggled to interact with local students due to their lack of Cantonese proficiency. Additionally, cultural differences led them to connect more with peers from familiar cultural backgrounds, resulting in poor integration and feelings of being left out in the local environment.

      In the Thai context, Chaiyasat (2020) observed that French students struggled to adapt well to Thailand because they could not speak Thai. Similarly,

other international student groups particularly Japanese, Korean, Myanmar, African American, and American students experienced unexpected language challenges due to the extent to which the Thai language is used in daily interactions (Rhein & Jones, 2020; Rybo-LoPresti & Rhein, 2021). Beyond academic context, such communication challenges in cross-cultural exchanges were also observed by Myanmar employees in the Thai workplace (San, 2020). These studies suggest that students without the local language cannot function or build relationships within their new community. In non-English speaking countries like Thailand, foreign students need both English and Thai in order to improve social interactions and integrate into the local culture.

Academic Challenges

Adjusting to a new academic culture and social life in a foreign country can be stressful (Srisakda, 2018). International students must adapt to unfamiliar teaching styles, curriculum gaps, instructor expertise, lecture quality, course structures, academic materials, evaluation systems, and interaction with peers and instructors (Cena et al., 2021). Students who are accustomed to rote memorization must learn critical thinking skills to succeed in the host university and develop new skills to meet new academic demands (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). In Myanmar, the education system is teacher-centered and uses rote memorization with limited opportunities for open discussion. While critical thinking is considered beneficial, Than (2018) argued that rote learning remains necessary in Myanmar education and cannot be immediately replaced, as it has been crucial to students' academic success. However, these traditional learning styles can make it difficult for students to adapt to international academic environments where critical thinking is emphasized. Even students with adequate language skills and the ability to adapt to a new culture may struggle with gaps in their studies.

Several studies have examined the academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation process of international students in Thailand, including the Chinese and Vietnamese (Qian et al., 2017; Srikrai et al., 2016). One of the academic challenges for international students is adapting to unfamiliar research writing practices (Ravichandran et al., 2017). Many students struggle to give accurate references and format citations properly (Alostath, 2021). Myanmar students in China, for example, lacked foundational knowledge and had limited practical experience in their field of study (Moe, 2021). Likewise, international postgraduate students in Malaysia struggled with academic writing despite their higher English language skills (Singh, 2015). Many such students arrived at their new schools with limited exposure to academic norms, and it took time and effort to adapt to new academic requirements

(Liu & Huang, 2021; Song & Yang, 2014). Divergent academic practices among countries may hinder students' ability to adapt successfully.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to changing behaviors and attitudes as individuals adjust to a new culture (Kang & Yossuck, 2020). Among theoretical models, Lysgaard's (1955) U-shaped curve is widely used to explain cross-cultural adaptation made over time. However, cross-cultural adaptation is complex, and one model cannot entirely describe it (Kim, 2001). While the U-shaped curve shows the psychological trajectory of adaptation, Searle and Ward (1990) and Ward and Kennedy (1999) incorporated adjustments in behavior. The present study utilizes the concept of adaptation proposed by Searle and Ward (1990), and Ward and Kennedy (1999), along with coping strategies, to show how students adapt. Cross-cultural adaptation includes both sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). These two aspects of adaptation are shown to be interrelated (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). More precisely, sociocultural adaptation describes how well individuals can function and practically integrate into the host culture while psychological adaptation refers to individuals' sense of comfort and satisfaction during a cultural transition (Ward et al., 2001).

Sociocultural adaptation is considered in two respects: relationships with local people and performing daily activities (Moghaddam et al., 1993). Verbal communication (language interactions) and non-verbal cues (body language and social etiquette) are equally essential for sociocultural adaptation (Ward, 2004; Ward et al., 2001). The literature also highlights the relationship between social interactions and acculturation while studying abroad, noting that the ability to use the local language enhances individuals' willingness to communicate, thereby promoting interactions through language (Yu & Wright, 2024). This is evident in recent research emphasizing willingness to learn local language through various learning methods in diverse cultures, including Thailand, which enhance adaptation. Exposure to the second language in the classroom, among peers, and through media all help students learn (Baroto, 2017). Generally, international students in Thailand improve their Thai by memorizing expressions from movies and interacting with locals who can speak basic English (Ferdian, 2016). For instance, Chinese students who learned Thai were able to connect with the local community (Tong & Chayanuvat, 2022). Acknowledging the importance of local language proficiency, Ward (2004) mentioned "the quality and quantity of intercultural interactions" in facilitating adaptation (p. 190). Meanwhile, non-verbal communication such as body language, gestures, and tools like translation apps, help overcome communication barriers, especially for those with limited local language skills

(Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian, 2020; Ward et al., 2001). Regardless of these strategies, Myanmar students experienced sociocultural adaptation issues when interacting with locals more than their Korean, Japanese and African American peers (Rhein & Jones, 2020). These challenges were influenced by historical backgrounds between Myanmar and Thailand. While Korean and Japanese students were viewed as representing respectable cultural traditions, Myanmar students were less favored, in terms of cultural representation, which also affected building social connections with host Thai peers.

Psychological adaptation is typically discussed in terms of stressors and coping strategies (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2008). Studies indicate that students who form social networks with domestic peers tend to develop better communicative competence and higher self-esteem, resulting in fewer psychological adaptation difficulties (Kim & Semmler, 2013). Successful academic adaptation is related to psychological adaptation, as academic adjustment is one of the primary aspects of international students' oversea education (Srisakda, 2018). Social support is also a predictor in psychological adaptation. Healthy relationships between the teacher and the student, characterized by teachers' positive attitudes, openness and peer support can lessen academic burdens and improve academic outcomes (Räisänen et al., 2020). Although social support increases positive adaptation, the experience of discrimination has negative effects on study abroad experiences (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). Rhein (2016) reported negative adaptation among Myanmar students in Thailand, including difficulties socializing with host students and experiences of discrimination due to historical tensions and the perception of Myanmar people as having lower social status in Thai society. While social networking with host peers positively impacts adaptation, research also emphasizes the importance of co-national peers among international students (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Interacting with peers who share a common language appears to contribute to increased self-efficacy and reduced stress (Hirai et al., 2015). Furthermore, facilities and services such as library resources and academic advising support international students' academic adaptation (Krsmanovic, 2020; Smith, 2021). Nonetheless, external support alone is insufficient for successful academic adaptation. Effective time management is another crucial factor in academic success. Nasrullah and Khan (2015) showed a positive correlation between time management skills and academic performance, noting that good time management reduces academic stress and improved academic performance among university students in Pakistan. These strategies contribute to students' ability to adapt to language and academic challenges while studying abroad. Since academic progress is the primary purpose of overseas education, academic adaptation improves psychological adaptation.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, limited research has been conducted on Myanmar students' language and academic challenges, as well as the factors contributing to their sociocultural, psychological and academic adaptation. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the gap by exploring experiences of Myanmar postgraduate students in Thailand, regarding their language barriers and academic challenges, along with the strategies they used to improve their language skills and adapt to a new academic culture.

Methodology

Research Participants

The study involved 33 master's degree students, consisting of 7 males and 26 females, aged 22 to 35 years. These participants left their home country following the revolutionary period in 2021. They are enrolled in public or private universities in Thailand, where English is the medium of instruction. Their fields of study included tourism management, business administration, public health, and education. The length of stay in Thailand ranged from six months to over two years.

Research Instrument

This study employed a semi-structured interview approach to gain deeper insights into Myanmar students' experiences with language barriers, academic challenges, and adaptation strategies. Six interview questions were developed drawing on relevant research regarding dual language challenges, academic struggles, and the adaptation experiences of Myanmar students in non-English speaking countries (Moe, 2021; Rhein, 2016; Rhein & Jones, 2020). Studies by Aydinol (2013) and Dou (2021) were also incorporated which similarly employed the qualitative research design using semi-structured interview questions to explore academic, social, and personal experiences of international students abroad. Developing the interview questions based on these studies allowed the researchers to obtain insightful responses and broaden the understanding of international students' experiences.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the interview questions, the researchers conducted a review process involving nine informants who have experience in international education. Their evaluation assessed the alignment between the research objectives and the interview items. The Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) Index of 1.00 for all six questions showed that they were well-aligned with the research objectives, confirming their reliability for data collection. A pilot study with five non-population respondents was then conducted to assess the feasibility of the interview questions. Once the results supported the instrument's validity, it was approved by the Institutional Review

Board (IRB) at the researchers' home institution, ensuring it aligns with ethical research standards.

Data Collection Procedures

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling method. Individual interviews with 33 students were conducted via the Zoom online platform. The researchers obtained their consent before their participation. The interviews were conducted in the Myanmar language, as using participants' mother tongue enabled them to provide more insightful responses and express themselves more accurately. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, which allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences. Follow-up questions were asked when participants provided general information about their experiences and adaptation strategies. Each interview session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded. Following the interviews, one of the researchers, a native Myanmar speaker, translated the data into English. The translation process was carried out in collaboration with a research assistant who is proficient in both languages and has experience in translation. The research assistant helped verify the accuracy and reliability of the translations.

Data Analysis

The researchers employed thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying prominent features within datasets, allowing a well-organized interpretation of results (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). This approach enabled the researchers to categorize recurring themes that reflected the participants' common experiences. Themes that appeared in at least two-thirds of the responses, equivalent to 22 out of 33 participants, were considered significant. First, the researchers thoroughly reviewed the translated transcripts while taking notes on similar ideas. Next, the researchers identified excerpts which reflected participants' shared experiences. During this stage, expressions that suggested communication difficulties with locals (e.g., "*Taking taxis is the most difficult part of communicating with Thai locals*") and struggles with academic demands (e.g., "*The major difference now is the emphasis on self-study*") were highlighted as they indicated potential themes related to language and academic challenges. Moreover, statements which reflected their adaptation strategies such as "*I memorized words and phrases,*" and "*I have to dedicate all my time to studies*," were noted. In the third stage, the researchers grouped these codes into potential themes. For example, codes related to difficulties in social interactions due to language gaps were organized under the theme of language barriers, while statements suggesting struggles with academic studies were categorized under the theme labelled academic challenges. Then, the researchers labeled the themes and reviewed them for

coherence and consistency. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, the researchers consulted with two English speaking peers to review coding decisions, ensuring diverse perspectives and reducing potential biases. Finally, the researchers provided explanations of how they represented the participants' experiences.

Results and Discussion

Challenges among Myanmar Students

This session addresses the first research question, which examines Myanmar students' experiences with language barriers and academic challenges, presenting two relevant themes for each aspect.

Language Barriers

Dual Communication Challenges.

Participants reported experiencing communication difficulties, primarily stemming from two factors: locals' reluctance to use English, and students' limited Thai proficiency. 23 participants mentioned the extent to which Thai language is used in non-academic environments. Student 10 shared the inconvenience of relying solely on English without having Thai language skills. He remarked, "Many Thais don't speak English, compared to people from Myanmar," noting that even educated Thais often preferred speaking their mother tongue. Student 7 shared his difficulties, exemplified by a situation at a BTS station. He noted that a Thai woman abruptly walked away when he asked for directions in English, saying, "Excuse me." Likewise, many participants reported that despite their ability to speak basic Thai phrases, locals seemed frustrated once they initiated speaking English. This issue seems to stem from the fact that Thai people generally use English as a foreign language, which is limited to education as a way to improve career prospects (Thongwichit, 2013). Student 23 provided additional comments on communication challenges in interactions with taxi drivers.

> If they don't understand, they simply say "no," even the taxi drivers. They don't want to try to understand. It is difficult to talk to them when we are actively trying to explain, and they keep saying no. They don't give us a chance to explain. I think they might have a fear of speaking a foreign language. (Extract 1, Student 23)

Student 23 described certain occasions where locals refused to listen, despite his best efforts to explain himself in English. He also ended up in the wrong place because of problems communicating with taxi drivers, showing how the lack of common language skills creates confusing situations. This is in line

with Chaiyasat (2020), who found similar communication challenges among French students in Thailand. This observation further supports San (2020), who reported that Myanmar employees perceived many Thais as favoring their mother tongue, hesitating to use English when communicating with foreigners, even in business settings. In this light, Srivirat (2015) suggested that some Thai people avoid interacting with foreign individuals, possibly due to concerns about misunderstanding or a lack of knowledge on how to properly behave with them. Meanwhile, 30 participants admitted that they had not learned Thai before relocating to Thailand. Although they enrolled in international programs where English is the medium of instruction, their inability to speak Thai affected their communication with locals in shops, restaurants, and taxis. Student 21 shared her initial struggles with ordering food during the first few months of her stay. She explained, "Since the food is normally sweet, I asked for less sugar, but they misunderstood and thought I meant the meal did not have enough sugar, so they added more. I couldn't eat it." This example illustrates how limited Thai language skills can lead to misunderstandings, even for something as simple as ordering food. This finding confirms similar issues reported in existing research, such as Rybo-LoPresti and Rhein (2021), who found that American students in Thailand could not communicate with locals in shops or restaurants, nor with vendors or taxis. Participants in this study also mentioned how the language barrier created problems with daily activities in Thailand. Their experiences show that foreign students living in non-English speaking countries like Thailand need the local language to get along.

Feeling like Outsiders.

Communication barriers made students feel like foreigners and hindered their ability to integrate into the host environment. 23 participants reported feeling like outsiders in Thailand. Student 22 expressed this sentiment outside classroom activities with his Thai friends, stating, "When they have a larger group of themselves, they speak in Thai." Although he showed no negative feelings about this, he tended to step back from the group in such situations. This sense of exclusion echoes the experiences of international students in Hong Kong, who also felt like "outsiders" in extracurricular activities and the local community due to the language gap (Yu & Wright, 2024, p. 8). Participants in this study similarly revealed that their lack of Thai proficiency, combined with some Thais' reluctance to speak English, resulted in feelings of being foreigners. Student 32 remarked on how these challenges affected their participation in extracurricular activities, where local language barriers limited their social networks.

> When we have some events, they are announced in Thai. Only some events organized by the international organization are presented in English. For graduation, we need 100 activity hours. Since most of the activities are presented in Thai, we were often unaware and did not notice them. When programs and posters are in Thai, they primarily work with Thai volunteers. (Extract 2, Student 32)

She explained that international students were often unnoticed when announcements were made in Thai during several school events. Student 31 mentioned social activities primarily conducted in Thai left her feeling excluded. This experience parallels the findings of Nwokedi and Khanare (2020), who highlighted international students in South Africa experienced psychological stress due to unwelcoming attitudes and a lack of belonging, stemming from their limited local language proficiency. Calikoglu's (2018) study in Finland also reported psychological challenges, feeling like outsiders in the community, struggling to integrate and build friendships as they could not speak the local language. Despite the differences in linguistic contexts, these findings show the negative consequences of limited local language skills for students in non-English speaking environments which create difficulties in social integration. Reflecting his communication difficulties, Student 7 admitted, "I regret not learning Thai before coming here," suggesting his struggles with daily communication. Despite the use of English as a medium of communication in academic activities, the local language remains a barrier to engaging in social activities for students with limited local language skills, contributing to their feelings of being outsiders in predominantly Thai-speaking environments.

Academic Challenges

Better Educational Standards.

26 participants reported their lack of sufficient subject knowledge posed challenges during their transition to Thai education. Although Rhein (2016) reported Myanmar undergraduate students' lower satisfaction to limited classroom discussion in Thailand, participants in this study observed several notable gaps between Myanmar and Thai universities in terms of course structures (elective courses, course outlines, presentations, group projects, exam dates) and resources (library and information, academic resources, digital tools). This difference may relate to the fact that participants in Rhein's study came from Western educational background whereas those in the present study were from Myanmar education, where rote learning was prioritized and transitioned to Thai universities for their postgraduate studies. Student 21, for example, shared her initial concerns with the grading system and elective courses, which were new to her. She said, "We have options and

elective courses here. It was challenging at first. I asked for my advisor's suggestions, and he said it would be fine. I feel like he does not really understand my situation." She mentioned that choosing elective courses that aligned with her interests was confusing due to her lack of experience with such a system. Similar situation was reported in Moe (2021), who found that differences in educational systems, curriculum, and teaching styles posed challenges for Myanmar students at a Chinese university, due to their lack of exposure to foundational knowledge. Student 27 elaborated on how the education in Thailand differs from her prior experience.

> I studied for six years in Myanmar, but I was not really interested in the subjects. I studied IT and had to write code, but it didn't capture my interest. I only studied seriously two weeks before exams. During my bachelor's degree, I memorized the lessons without fully understanding them. Here, I have to study everything thoroughly. If I don't study, I won't understand the material. Sometimes, we don't have exams in some subjects. Instead, our performance during the three hours of lecture time is assessed. (Extract 3, Student 27)

Student 27's comments showed that transition from rote learning to critical thinking posed challenges in her studies. In addition, participants such as Student 20 noted, "We don't have to do such systematic research back in Myanmar." Her comment revealed the academic standards in Thai education required her to fully comprehend the subject matter. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Cena et al., 2021; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016), differences between the academic system at home and that of the host country create obstacles in learning for Myanmar students. Participants acknowledged that universities in Thailand offer a more resourceful education compared to that of Myanmar, including better teaching styles, learning methods, lesson plans, and resources. However, these differences made the initial adaptation to a new academic environment challenging.

Limited Exposure to Academic Practices.

27 participants identified a lack of foundational knowledge and academic writing skills as primary academic difficulties. Academic writing, requiring references and citations, was challenging at first. Student 3 explained, "It was confusing at first to learn how to cite journals, books, websites, and so on. It is new for me and hard to understand all types of formats." This is consistent with Alostath (2021) and Ravichandran et al. (2017), who observed that international students in the US and Turkey struggled with referencing due to the lack of a systematic approach in their home countries, where the focus was more on research content rather than proper citations. Student 12 shared similar difficulty with identifying academic books and journal articles.

> When I started studying for my MA, I couldn't even differentiate between books and articles. I didn't even know what to ask teachers because I didn't know what I didn't know. I didn't know how to do citations and references either. (Extract 4, Student 12)

Student 12 did not even know what questions to ask her professors, an indication that her education in Myanmar lacked standardized academic practices (Than, 2018). Furthermore, participants raised concerns about plagiarism. Student 6 stated, "I was afraid it might accidentally result in plagiarism," illustrating that regardless of his adequate English skills, plagiarism remained a major concern. These findings concur with Singh's (2015) report, which, although in a different culture and study context, showed that international postgraduate students in Malaysia experienced academic writing challenges despite higher English language proficiency. Student 17 recounted the initial stress in adapting to the process of independent study, remarking, "I am studying independent study, and I have to study hard which feels different from the education system in Myanmar." Student 21 noted her fear of academic failure during acculturation process, which is consistent with Liu and Huang (2021) who described this stressful experience as "reasonable academic burden," reflecting the regular pressure to meet the academic demands in pursuit of better academic outcomes (p. 1429). The present study highlights a lack of prior knowledge in subject matter and academic writing emerged as another academic challenge for many Myanmar students in Thai universities.

Students' Adaptation to the Challenges

This section addresses the second research question which examines how Myanmar students adapt to challenges related to language and academics. Their coping strategies and factors contributing to sociocultural and academic adaptation are presented under two main topics. Each topic is further categorized into two relevant themes, providing deeper insights into their adaptation experiences.

Sociocultural Adaptation

Enhancing Thai Language Skills.

23 participants expressed their willingness to improve their Thai language skills through language classes, YouTube tutorials, and interactions with friends, which contribute to positive sociocultural adaptation. Their diverse approaches such as classroom interactions and conversations with local people are considered essential for language learners (Baroto, 2017). Some students attended basic Thai language classes offered by their universities, significantly

easing their adaptation to daily interactions. Student 22 described learning useful phrases (e.g., rice and how much is it?), practicing them with Thai friends, and learning from YouTube tutorials. This is also evident in Tong and Chayanuvat's (2022) study, who recognized Chinese students' motivation to learn Thai to meet the language demands in social activities, connecting with Thai culture, and their willingness to integrate with the local community. Student 28 elaborated her effort to integrate by learning Thai from movies and language classes as well as interacting with locals. Her statement showed her ability to interact with people effectively.

> When shopping, taking taxis, and riding motorbikes, they sometimes taught me how to pronounce words correctly. For example, when I mispronounced swimming pool, they taught me the right pronunciation like /sà wâ:j nám/ (swimming pool) on the way to the destination. (Extract 5, Student 28)

Student 28 also described learning numbers, prices, and daily vocabulary, including the names of fruits and drinks such as /t͡ɕʰā : tʰāj/ (Thai tea). Learning Thai helps foster social interactions, thereby enhancing sociocultural adaptation, defined as the ability to perform daily tasks in a new environment (Ward et al., 2001). This finding also supports Yu and Wright's (2024) assertion that a desire to use the local language along with appropriate acculturation attitudes enhances adaptation. Consistent with Ward and Rana-Debula (1999), Student 28's statement shows that language proficiency and smooth social interactions with local people are keys to her sociocultural adaptation. Student 4 shared, "I memorized words and phrases related to food, like how to describe the tastes I prefer when ordering. In coffee shops, I learned how to ask for less sweetness." Her use of the local language enabled her to perform her daily tasks. This supports Moghaddam et al.'s (1993) assertion that relationships with local people and the ability to perform daily activities are keys to sociocultural adaptation. Overall, participants in this study showed how learning Thai facilitated their adaptation to the local Thai environment.

Using Gestures and Translation Tools.

While many participants gradually improved their Thai skills, achieving communicative language proficiency took time. 25 participants mentioned the frequent use of alternative approaches, particularly hand gestures, and translation tools for daily communication. This experience suggested the urgent decision to study abroad with insufficient time to prepare for the language. Student 6 noted, "I used hand gestures several times. I mix basic English words along with using hand gestures. It helps me communicate better in Thai-speaking environments." This practical communication demonstrates his effort to meet the local language demands despite limited Thai proficiency. This strategy,

although employed in a different context, aligns with Jhaiyanuntana and Nomnian's (2020) report, that Thai undergraduate interns also used hand gestures and sign language to communicate with foreign guests in a hospitality industry. Participants' experiences reflected their ease of sociocultural adaptation, as suggested by Ward (2004) and Ward et al. (2001) that non-verbal interactions including body language contribute to adaptation. Students also emphasized the effectiveness of using Google Translate for important and lengthy conversations to avoid misunderstandings. Student 12 explained how she relied on Google Translate on many occasions including during her master's thesis.

> *When I did research for my master's thesis, I collected data from Thai boatmen and fishermen. I had a translator, but the translator can only speak Thai, not English. So, we communicated through Google Translate. We didn't need to say anything; we just used the translation machine for mutual understanding. I also interviewed people from Thai governmental sectors. Since it was the Covid period, I conducted interviews over the phone. The translator helped me ask the questions and translated the information back to me using Google Translate.* (Extract 6, Student 12)

Student 12's experience shows how digital tools helped her overcome Thai language barriers during her research. Student 28 added, "I use Google Translate, which helps a lot when I have to deal with transportation and buying food." These findings align with the experiences of Chinese, French and American students in Thailand who recognized the effectiveness of Google Translate and body language in communicating with local Thais (Chaiyasat, 2020; Qian et al., 2017; Rybo-LoPresti & Rhein, 2021). Participants' social interactions through non-verbal communication supported their adaptation to the sociocultural environment, as Ward (2004) pointed out the importance of both the quality and quantity of interactions in fostering adaptation. Students' use of alternative approaches for effective communication somehow overcome Thai language barriers, thereby facilitating adaptation to Thai-speaking environments.

Academic Adaptation

Teacher and Peer Support.

27 participants highlighted that the supportive guidance from professors, seniors and classmates eased their transition to the academic community. Student 6 commented on how constructive feedback and encouragement from professors positively influenced his academic adaptation. Student 30 also shared, "The teachers are so nice, and my advisor is so nice to me that I can talk frankly to him. Even when I don't understand something, he explains it well and provides all the resources." These responses demonstrated the role of professors in fostering students' academic adaptation, which aligns with

Liu and Huang (2021), highlighting that healthy teacher-student relationships, along with teachers' positive attitudes and openness to discussions, reduce academic burdens. Student 12 echoed similar sentiments, noting that consistent support from her research advisor helped alleviate academic stress.

> I have to read quite a lot of articles before talking with my advisor. Then, I finally discuss my ideas with her. We have a meeting every two weeks. I present what I have read using PowerPoint slides, and she gives me feedback, and it is really helpful. (Extract 7, Student 12)

Student 12 further emphasized that conducting research was stressful and she would have failed to continue without her advisor's constructive feedback. As similarly noted in Krsmanovic (2020) and Smith (2021), support from the academic community is one of the core factors in students' adjustment. Student 27's comment reflected her decreasing academic stress, further suggesting psychological adjustment to a new academic culture. Her response, "I feel like I am now truly becoming educated," indicates the satisfaction with Thai education, illustrating her successful academic adaptation in the Thai university. It also supports Srisakda's (2018) assertion that successful academic adaptation is closely linked to psychological adaptation, since academic success is the primary goal of studying abroad. Beyond support from professors and advisors, students highlighted the importance of collaborative work with their academic friends. Student 7 noted that discussions sessions including senior friends and classmates from Indonesia and India made his academic adaptation easier. Moreover, participants explained that social networks, including friends from Myanmar, eased their academic adaptation. Student 30 mentioned, "Even when we don't understand the concepts and the lessons, we can ask them to explain. They help us a lot with the subject matter. They share their knowledge and experience." Student 21 similarly noted that group discussion with academic peers were helpful for understanding lectures.

> In our group discussions, we talk about what the teachers taught, how we understand it, and we share our opinions with one another. Our friends are from different countries, not just Thailand. We also have friends from places like India. We take resources from the library and gain knowledge from teachers and senior students. We receive suggestions from seniors, including those from Myanmar. (Extract 8: Student 21)

Student 21 explained that suggestions and feedback from seniors and classmates played a critical role in bridging knowledge gaps and facilitating her academic adaptation. Consistent with Rivas et al.'s (2019) discussion, the finding highlights that social connectedness with fellow students improves the adjustment process. This guidance from seniors helped her overcome challenges in lessons and theories, reflecting Räisänen et al.'s (2020) study, which reported that positive

social interactions with peers significantly contributed to academic, social, and mental well-being among undergraduate students' adaptation in a Finnish university. Despite differences in cultural backgrounds, these findings consistently reveal a common understanding that peer support positively influences academic adaptation. It also supports Searle and Ward's (1990) argument that social support is effective for psychological adaptation, as positive relationships between teachers and students, lessen academic burdens and improve academic outcomes. These positive adaptation experiences contrast with earlier findings by Rhein (2016) and Rhein and Jones (2020) who reported that Myanmar students faced more adaptation difficulties than other nationalities due to unfavorable attitudes and perceived lower social status of Myanmar people, as well as historical conflicts in bilateral relations. Nonetheless, participants in this study described the supportive and friendly nature of Thai lecturers and peers, as helpful in facilitating their academic success.

Increasing Self-Study Time.

In addition to support from the academic community, 26 participants added that dedicating time to self-study was essential for academic adaptation. Student 17 stated, "I have to dedicate all my time to studies; I don't have much time for any other activities," remarking the significant time investment required due to a lack of foundational skills. Similarly, Student 28 stressed the importance of time management and self-discipline in research writing. He explained, "When I have to take responsibility for my own progress in research writing, I really need to handle myself better to avoid wasting time, as it is quite different and difficult." He further described research that required greater personal responsibility to handle the academic workload effectively. The finding concurs with Song and Yang (2014), who noted that transitioning to a new academic setting requires students to invest extra time and energy in assignments and homework. Student 27 also shared her dedication to meeting the academic expectations, saying, "There are many activities at school, such as Myanmar family activities, but I haven't joined any of them. I often spend the entire day at the library." These experiences suggest that adapting to academic demands requires a commitment to independent learning and effective time management, supporting Kaushar (2013), who found effective time management, efficient time allocation, strategic planning, and setting priorities and goals crucial in academic progress. Student 23 further noted the school library as convenient for gathering additional information for assignments and research.

> When facing difficulties with assignments, simply asking friends for explanations isn't always sufficient. I often find myself at a standstill, unable to proceed without a thorough understanding. So, it requires me to do independent learning. There are times when I book a study room at the library and dedicate an entire day to self-study. (Extract 9, Student 23)

Student 23 described his transition to more independent learning which included individual assignments, research and group presentations in Thai universities, reflecting changing habits in studies. Facilities and services, such as libraries, improve the learning environment, aligning with Smith's (2021) observation that such resources are crucial in easing students' adjustment to a new academic environment. Consistent with Nasrullah and Khan (2015), the findings also demonstrate that time management improves academic performance. Despite the challenge of balancing academic workload and self-study, participants viewed these difficulties as opportunities for growth, showing their willingness to adapt to the Thai academic community. They also expressed satisfaction with their commitment to study, illustrating their successful academic adaptation. While receiving support from their academic community, independent learning is equally important for students' better academic outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

By addressing the experiences of Myanmar postgraduate students in nine Thai universities, the findings provided answers to the two research questions. In response to the first research question, students revealed communication difficulties due to locals' inability to communicate in English and their lack of Thai language proficiency in a non-academic context, which resulted in their feeling like foreigners. Moreover, different educational standards in Thailand and their lack of academic knowledge caused challenges in academic studies. Most students revealed that they found Thai higher education quality more challenging since it differed from their previous experiences in Myanmar which specifically emphasized rote learning. Despite these difficulties, participants were well adapted to sociocultural and academic environments, employing similar coping strategies which provide answers to the second research question. They reported learning Thai as easing their sociocultural adaptation, while in some cases, students usually overcame using translation aids and non-verbal interactions. Meanwhile, they were well adapted to the academic environment through spending more time on self-study activities and receiving supportive help from teachers and peers.

The findings offer valuable insights into potential adaptation challenges that future Myanmar students may face in Thai universities, suggesting that coming students should be prepared for communication and academic

difficulties, and develop effective strategies to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, this study provides information for academic institutions and faculty members about the difficulties Myanmar students face, enabling them to implement necessary measures to support their adaptation. However, the present study focused on postgraduate students in Bangkok and its vicinities, which may not reflect the experiences of undergraduates or students in other parts of Thailand. In addition, the use of self-reported data may carry the risk of bias in students' description of their experiences. Studies could further examine the role of institutional and social support in shaping Myanmar students' adaptation process. Future research could also expand to include undergraduate students as well as those studying in other regions, such as Chiang Mai, which hosts a large Myanmar student population.

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Appendix

A List of Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. What was your experience using English as a medium of communication during your study abroad in Thailand? Can you share specific examples of how using English impacted your overall experience while being an international student in Thailand?
2. How did you respond to the English language challenges while studying abroad in Thailand?
3. Did you face any difficulties with the Thai language when interacting with locals, including friends, teachers, and the community? Could you describe the specific challenges you encountered?
4. Can you provide examples of how you overcame the Thai language barriers while interacting with Thai locals, friends, and teachers?
5. How did the academic experience in Thailand differ from or resemble that of Myanmar? What were the most challenging aspects of studying in Thailand?
6. Could you share how you dealt with academic challenges during your study abroad in Thailand?