

Beyond Ecological Challenges: International Students' Strengths and the Impact of Culturally Responsive Peer Mentorship on Academic Writing

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Abstract

This qualitative case study challenges the persistent deficit-based discourse and explores how culturally diverse international students negotiate ecological differences as academic writers in higher education. It highlights underrepresented student writers' assets as highly motivated, self-efficacious learners while it also addresses ecological challenges including academic language and cultural differences. Drawing on ecological, high-impact practices, self-transformation, and culturally responsive teaching frameworks, the research investigates participants' academic writing experiences including other-perceived surface-level barriers and self-perceived cultural challenges and learners' transformative strategies as well as peer mentors' culturally responsive mentoring strategies to provide targeted language support and foster deeper engagement for mutual transformations. Findings emphasize the importance of writer-assessed improvements in writing competence, tailored language support, culturally responsive peer mentoring, interaction with diverse peers, and fostering international cultural awareness. This study provides implications for curricular and extracurricular design and institutional support, and calls for reframing the discourse around international student engagement and success, acknowledging their strengths and the value of culturally responsive high-impact peer mentorship.

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Introduction

Global tertiary mobility continues to reach a record-high as the increase in the number of students pursuing higher education abroad persists, creating a new norm in the transnationally connected world. The unwavering status of English as the lingua franca in global communications has led students to English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2025). The recent OECD report further indicates that approximately half of the 5.02 million internationally mobile students study in these English-speaking nations, with the United States remaining the top destination. The Open Doors report also confirms the trend of U.S. dominance in international education in terms of the enduring growth of student enrollments (Institute of International Education, IIE, 2024) despite its geopolitical challenges with the rise of nationalist policies and of immigration policy uncertainty (Lee et al., 2021). Moreover, the American higher education system even recovered from the 2020/2021 global pandemic crisis and reached a record high of more than 1.1 million students in the 2023/2024 academic year, marking a 6.6% increase (IIE, 2024).

Academic writing in English, the predominant medium of instruction and communication in U.S. higher education, is deeply embedded in college life as first-year composition is almost universally required as part of the undergraduate general education curriculum (Miller, 2019) and English academic writing is known to be the common student learning assessment method throughout the college years. Limited academic writing skills in the new language have often been identified as an enduring gap on achievement gaps among international students whose works do not fulfill communication literacy standards at the institution; moreover, less significant, surface-level features such as grammar and vocabulary are commonly criticized (Giridharan & Robson, 2012) than a higher-order rhetorical understanding of multilingual writers. The deficit-based paradigm pervasive in the literature written in English has perpetuated a bias viewing language difference as a barrier inherent within individual students rather than a strength (Lee et al., 2019; Lomer et al., 2023).

This study challenges the existing deficiency paradigm in the literature that historically overlooks strengths that international students bring to the new college environments, and intends to fill the gap on asset-based lived experiences. In particular, acknowledging that college writing center consultations are readily available across campuses but the hidden impact on international student engagement and success is rarely discussed in the current high-impact practices discussion, the present study attempts to investigate the role of culturally responsive peer mentorship on minoritized international student writers' academic writing development. Overarching research questions that this study explores are as follows: How do culturally and linguistically diverse international students negotiate the ecological differences—the language, the culture, and the academic expectations—as they navigate academic writing in English? In what ways, if any, does culturally responsive peer mentorship impact the academic writing development and self-efficacy of international students?

To explore the aforementioned research questions, this study employs a qualitative case study design, socioculturally grounded on a theoretical framework that integrates an ecological perspective, high-impact practices, self-transformation theory, and culturally responsive teaching (see Figure 1).

Theoretical Framework

First, to investigate international students' nuanced lived experiences in learning and developing to write in English in academic genres through their interaction and consultation with peer writing mentors, it is important to view learning and development as an interactive process mediated through language and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Ecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Renn & Arnold, 2003) offer a holistic lens to understand students' experiences not as isolated incidents but as an interconnected part of multi-layered systems. For example, knowingly or unknowingly, macrosystems such as family/cultural expectations influence a number of international students' persistent drive to excel academically; uncertain immigration policies and lack of eligible federal financial aids lead to the top challenge of this minoritized student population at the exosystem level; quality of mesosystem-level curricular and extra-curricular activities and institutional student success resources (or lack thereof) shapes the student life holistically; then, not only microsystem-level interactions with study groups or friends but also students' demographic characteristics influence students' engagement and success in the nested ecological systems (Lee et al., 2021).

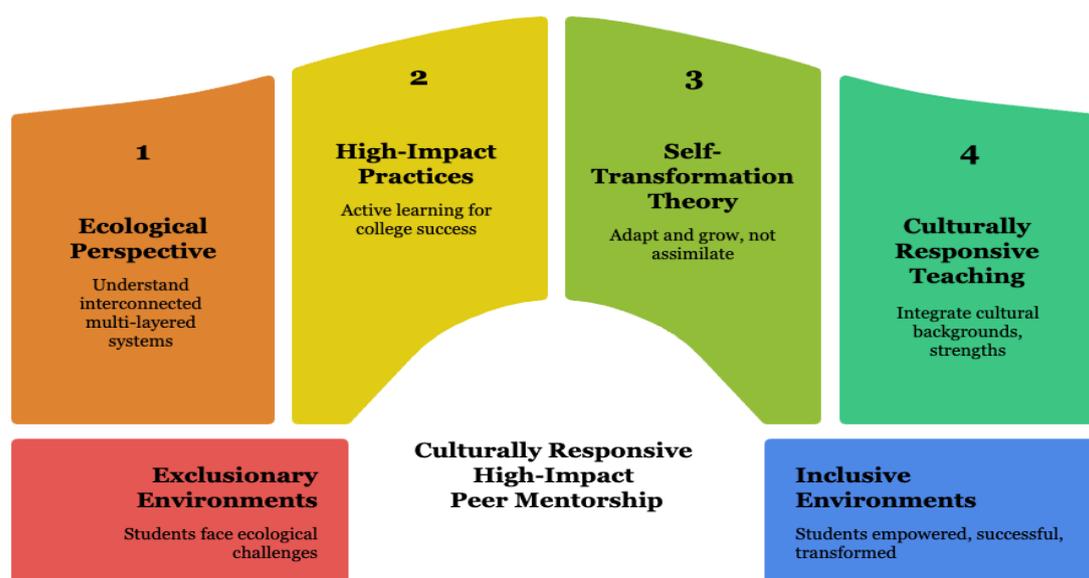


Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework

Then, a deeper look at the mesosystem level of the campus environments allows for identifying high-impact practices that are particular kinds of “active learning practices that are data-proven to make a significant impact on college and career success” (Lee et al., 2024, p. 181). Traditional high-impact practices literature recognizes the importance of deep learning and identifies as key practices first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, internships, capstone projects, and e-portfolios. These impactful college experiences are evidenced to require students' investment and structured knowledge application, reflection and integrative thinking that enables meaningful social interaction with faculty and peers (Kuh, 2008; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Further, the high-impact practices theory provides a solid conceptual

foundation for an expanded framework (Lee et al., 2024) developed from the study that found ten significant predictors of college and career success understood in terms of college degree completion and job employment or graduate/professional school enrollment as follows: academic and sociocultural engagement, study abroad, foreign language, co-op/internship, student teaching, advanced math and writing courses, research, and volunteer activities.

A further lens that links campus environments that are student-perceived as more exclusionary than inclusive and individual student success despite ecological challenges is that of self-transformation theory, focusing on how learners do not assimilate but adapt and grow (Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2017). Importantly, this transformative perspective is fundamentally distinct from the deficit view about international students in that the former acknowledges the barrier in the systems, not within the individual student to correct or fix, and thus that the goal of educational experience is not remedial but transformational. Logically, the self-transformation theory aligns well with the principle of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) with a critical vision that accounts for the third space for student empowerment that emphasizes the culturally responsive instructional methods, materials, and practices toward effective teaching, by integrating students' cultural backgrounds, frames of reference, and strengths into where learning takes place.

Method

Research Design

To fulfill the research quest for an exemplary case of culturally responsive teaching situated and bounded in college writing center peer consultations and to explore the nuanced dynamics of international student writers' and peer mentors' interactions, a qualitative case research design (Stake, 1995) was employed. The case study design does not aim for broad generalization but allows for particularization and naturalistic generalization by utilizing thick description, progressive focusing, and triangulation techniques and allowing me, the researcher, to interpret the data from multiple participants and sources.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a large, public, doctorate-granting, research intensive university located in Western New York with its historical reputation for its substantial international student enrollment. After the Institutional Review Board's approval was obtained, a theory-based, purposive sampling strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was implemented first to identify an exemplary case and target peer mentors renowned for their effective academic writing consultations with international student writers. Once the two peer mentors were invited and agreed to participate in the study, nine international student writers/mentees were invited to participate via convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Intentional efforts were made to recruit culturally diverse students representing the demographic of the international student population on campus. A total of 12 participants voluntarily participated in the study and 11 completed all research activities. All 11 final participants were racially and ethnically minoritized students on this global campus (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Role	Sex	Race/Ethnicity	Major
Joe	Mentor	Male	African American	Humanities
Damin	Mentor	Female	Korean	Humanities
Ping	Mentee	Female	Chinese	Social science
Ngozi	Mentee	Female	Nigerian	Social science
Yun	Mentee	Female	Chinese	Social science
Alara	Mentee	Female	Turkish	Social science
Dan	Mentee	Female	Chinese	Social science
Eunji	Mentee	Female	Korean	Humanities
Divya	Mentee	Female	Indian	Social science
Vani	Mentee	Female	Indian	STEM
Korir	Mentee	Male	Kenyan	Social science

Two peer mentors, Joe and Damin (pseudonyms), were a male African American and a female Korean respectively; both were doctoral students studying humanities, as shown in Table 1 (Participant Demographic Characteristics). Nine mentees were from diverse cultural backgrounds (including South Korea, China, Nigeria, Türkiye, India, and Kenya). The majority of the mentees majored in social science; there were one humanities mentee and one STEM major.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from multiple sources—online background questionnaires, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, field-notes about group and one-on-one consultation observations, and writing artifacts and reflections—to ensure data triangulation that was instrumental in understanding comprehensive lived experiences of diverse participants. Initial demographic surveys were designed to gather detailed information about their academic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, perceived academic and sociocultural readiness at the time of enrollment, self-assessed competence levels in academic writing in their home languages and English (before and after peer mentorship experience), perceived importance of English academic writing, self-assessed areas for improvement, and working strategies to improve academic writing in English. The main data source was in-depth semi-structured interviews—progressing from focused life history to detailed experiences and participant reflections (Seidman, 2013); the interview data (transcripts and field-notes) allowed for listening actively to the nuanced details of their other-perceived grammar issues and self-perceived cultural difficulties, changes in self-efficacy beliefs, and transactional peer mentorship process that influenced both mentees and mentors. Efforts were made not to disrupt the mentorship sessions but to protect vulnerable student participants; reflective field-notes were taken after a group workshop with focus on abstract writing skills and one-on-one consultation sessions. Thematic analysis (Creswell, 2003; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) was adopted to engage in iterative open coding, develop categories, and merge them into themes, with aims to identify key features of the exemplary case of culturally responsive peer mentorship on academic writing for international college students in the United States.

Results

The thematic analysis led to developing four major themes that feature the mentors' and mentees' peer mentoring experience as a potential high-impact practice. The integrated themes reaffirm the importance of acknowledging international student strength, reveal the other-perceived surface-level barriers vs self-perceived challenges from cultural differences, and illuminate the power of culturally responsive peer mentorship for mutual transformations in both mentees and peer mentors.

International Student Assets

Not surprisingly for this exemplary case study but importantly considering the ecological atmosphere that often felt exclusionary, a primary theme that distinguishes this case from typical learner experiences was a full re-discovery of international student assets, often hidden from the views of the faculty and peers. International student mentees consistently exhibited their high level of motivation, self-efficacy, and investment and demonstrated strong self-directed learning strategies.

Opposing the deficit view, Ngozi, a female education student from Nigeria, saw her multilingualism “as a strength, not a weakness...[as] I have this ability to think in different languages...that is different from my multilingualism being a problem”. With the growth mindset, motivation was a key asset to open the window of her new growth. To Ngozi, simply passing a course did not suffice her internal drive to excel: “I...felt like I was just fair enough, but then I wanted to be way better than I am”. Damin, a female peer mentor and English major from South Korea, echoed her international mentees' high level of motivation and following investment, stating, “I think one of the most important factors that...plays positively in consultations is the student motivation and their investment in their writing process.” Remarks from Korir, a male education major from Kenya--“I can say [my academic readiness level is] excellent. Though I make mistakes, it's just a mistake. I know what I would do”--and more from Joe, a male African American peer mentor majoring in American Studies--“they already have a routine...they know what they have to do in order to be successful and they put the work in”--voiced additional evidence for international mentees' confident belief in their ability to succeed and commitment to improvement.

While navigating the different mesosystem that did not provide curricular writing development opportunities, unlike two-or-three-course-sequence writing coursework required for undergraduate students, international graduate mentees sought out extensive reading, extra-curricular opportunities, and open resources, actively employing self-directed learning strategies. For example, Vani, a female engineering mentee from India, chose to “read a lot of papers, like to know how to write...I take my interest in reading others”; Ping, a female education major from China, chose to “went [go] into a workshop in our library to get at how to find articles” and to learn “[to write] my literature review from the YouTube”; Alara, a female statistics student from Türkiye, chose to develop personal reference tools like a digital log by “adding some vocabulary and phrases, mostly academic vocabulary thing”. When a desired supporting system was not existent, highly motivated students helped themselves.

Other-Perceived Surface-Level Barriers vs. Self-Perceived Cultural Challenges

Whereas international mentees possessed and demonstrated strengths as previously discussed, the new ecological systems seemed to disrupt the balance in international mentees' scholarly routines, abruptly with new hurdles to overcome. Every challenge that they had to live with was real, small or big; they did not have the privilege to ignore or postpone challenges due to immigration laws and institutional regulations to maintain full-time student status. It was noteworthy that the nature of the challenges from different sources (other-perceived vs self-perceived) was heterogeneous.

Interestingly but unfortunately, surface-level criticism by others (usually faculty) seemed to have been learned and internalized by some international mentees, who would often ask the peer mentors to "look to see...what grammar mistakes I've made", lamenting over faculty criticism, "I have a problem with grammar, my instructors say that they don't understand my writing". Eunji, a female art history student from South Korea, shared her concern about English-speaking others' negative evaluation and her confusion about the need to change to a different style: "Writing [was] easy elsewhere [in South Korea] but it became really different when I entered [the university abroad], leading to worry about [others'] perceptions". Others' criticism on grammar became a stressor affecting students' mental health and confidence as academic writers. To tackle the other-pressured hurdle, many mentees explicitly listed grammar in surveys and interviews as the specific area to improve as it was repeatedly criticized. Joe, the male African American peer mentor, also noted during the interview that "nine times out of ten, it's grammar" when he asked his mentees what they wanted to work on. With the new socially given stigma attached to their identities, writing was farther from what they could enjoy.

When international mentees were asked to take time and elaborate on actual challenges that they perceived, the stories detoured from grammar and vocabulary concerns to rhetorical and structural differences between world languages and cultures. Damin, the female South Korean mentor, shared the challenge as an international writer herself and reflected on the implicit vs. explicit transition and thesis placement differences as follows:

In Korean, I don't think we have very obvious [transitional expressions]. I mean it's kind of unnatural if we keep saying, however, furthermore, in addition, because we just have more subtle ways to make that transition, and we are supposed to get [understand] it [the message without American-clear transitions]. Here in anglophone, I think they emphasize, put thesis at the beginning of paragraph and all, but, in like other cultural practices, we [Koreans] don't do that, like very obviously.

The felt mandate to comply with U.S. academic expectations created a dilemma in this proficient academic writer and doctoral candidate majoring in English, making her writing feel "unnatural".

Ping, the female Chinese mentee, also shared her-perceived challenge due to unspoken, culturally-bound expectations of rhetorical structure in academic writing in English: "In China, they describe first and then show opinions, but American people show their opinion first and then use evidence to illustrate...so if you don't change your Chinese way of writing, your professors in America can't understand you". This type of cultural challenge was aggravated when it was coupled with uniquely different expectations from different professors as Yun, a female social science major from China, reflected on her international peer's experience as follows:

One student felt confused when different professors had divergent expectations, specifically noting the conflict between needing simplicity/clarity [following American direct, concise style] versus wanting to write in a sophisticated/dedicated style [following indirect, elaborate style of her cultural heritage]. The pursuit of clarity and simplicity sometimes conflicts with the desire to use high or complicated words, which, they [international students] believe, demonstrate sophistication.

This theme highlights that self-perceived challenges that students lived with were not a lack of structure in individual student writers but due to cultural differences in rhetorical and structural styles influenced by macrosystems beyond grammar errors on the surface.

The Power of Culturally Responsive Peer Mentorship for Mutual Transformations

The study's main quest to explore the key features of the effective peer mentoring recognized by international mentees, was fulfilled by the analytical discovery of culturally responsive teaching in mentee-mentor interactions. Student writers' on-going microgenetic development in academic writing within a semester (Ping, "growth happened through every week's writing consultation") was satisfactorily self-assessed (Eunji, self-assessing her growth from fair to good competency) and externally validated as their professors recognized the growth, correspondingly bolstering students' confidence (Yun, the female social science major from China, was "told by my/[her] advisors that they were impressed by my/[her] improved writing...I/[She] got a lot of confidence"). A newly found high-impact practice was an assemblage of academic engagement (Ping, "Damin always asked me questions...this push led to more organized and logical writing"), student teaching (actualized in the peer mentor-mentee teaching and learning context), foreign language (often the status of English before their transnational mobility), study abroad (the essence of global mobility), and advanced writing (focused on cognitive and cultural development beyond a linguistic remedy). The impactful peer mentorship—featuring trusting relationships and enhanced writing competence and confidence—was scaffolded by peer mentors' tailored culturally responsive feedback and support in the mesosystem environment where minoritized students' cultural identity was utilized as a resource and trust was gained via peer mentors' active listening.

To illustrate the theme of the power of culturally responsive peer mentorship, as Joe's mentees knew that "if I go to Joe, he's not going to just try to take over my paper, he's actually going to listen to what I'm trying to say", the highly reputed peer mentor "listened actively, ask[ing] questions until he understands/[understood]...the student's intention and conceptual logic, leading to fostering trust". By listening actively, peer mentors created a preferred space for growth. As Ping did, international students also "chose Damin because they [now] feel ideas is/[are] more important than the grammar, than the words, because your paper aims to let readers understand and get good points". Importantly, in this space for deep engagement and learning, students' backgrounds were not an impairment to treat but turned into culturally responsive resources for further growth in intercultural understanding as Damin discussed it with a student from Saudi Arabia who was "hesitant to use I statements...as it feels like I'm/[she was] showing off" but later enjoyed learning from Damin about the impact of the rhetorical move on her application committee. The power of peer mentorship lay in its cultural responsiveness, particularly important for minoritized students in a predominantly white institution.

Moreover, mentees' noted transformation from passive learners like an "obedient child" (Yun) to "find your own voice" (Joe) with their "authentic" self was mediated by peer mentors' tailored, macro-level support. Joe, the peer mentor, reflected on the impact of his authenticity approach on mentees' changes in ownership as follows:

My mentoring focus [is] on macro issues, writers' points, their ideas, not grammar or mechanics... Students [grow to] have strong ownership to their ideas and if they don't feel that I represent their ideas accurately, they resist and I think this is really cool to have this moment of resistance. I really love seeing this more personal dynamic in the setting of [the] writing center.

In Damin's mentoring sessions, to facilitate her mentee's transformation, she modeled language appropriate for academic genres, often the student-self-assessed area of need. Damin was "willing to provide those sentences for them...[Based on her own experience,] the example sentences from my/[her] professors or books really helped me/[her] to understand how to sort of write an academic discourse". Transformations took place in this socially mediated space, not a quiet independent work station.

Notably, the outcome of invested engagement between the mentee and the peer mentor extended to the peer mentors, creating mutual transformations. Whereas mentors shared about the work environment that linguistic justice was taken for granted and no formal mentor training was offered, they noted their own mediated growth in a deeper understanding of culturally responsive and inclusive teaching practices owing to their deeper engagement with peer mentees. Damin observed some international mentees visiting the writer center as a "buffering zone and a place for more or less personalized help where students felt comfortable opening up about grievances and frustrations experienced with faculty". She added her observation of the writing center growing to a "sanctuary place" for minoritized students as follows.

She [her mentee of two semesters wearing a hijab] stopped wearing hijab after the election...she didn't want to risk now...So then that time that conversation came up in our meeting and how to make our center like a sanctuary place without necessarily saying it that we should be more aware....The writing center is not the office of inclusion but in a way this is um the center is embracing differences among our students...often this/[these] consultations sessions are not just about writing techniques, often they express their frustration...a lot of negative feedback that they experienced from their professors.

This small community of peer writers and mentors created a safe space on campus, fulfilling the mission of diversity, equity, and inclusion, informally and meaningfully.

Discussion

Findings of this study present a counter-narrative to the persistent deficit-oriented discourse about globally mobile college students in the United States. The three lived-experience-driven, interconnected themes highlight the importance of understanding students' journeys holistically and systematically as they influence and are influenced by multi-system ecological environments (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Lee et al., 2021; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Results also illuminate the need for creating and sustaining the Critical International Language Pedagogy (CILP) (Kim, 2016). This framework features three principles--transnational culture building, critical caring, and authentic learning (see Figure 2)--that should encompass curricular and extra-curricular college experiences, recognizing that socially mediated learning and development extends beyond classroom walls.

CILP Principle 1: Transnational Culture Building

The first interconnected CILP principle of transnational culture building (Kim, 2016) acknowledges and fosters dynamic bilingualism/multilingualism as a celebrated norm in a globally interconnected society. Scholars should debunk the biased deficit paradigm focused on what seems to be lacking within individual students according to culturally exclusionary standards (Lomer et al., 2023). Higher education leaders should role-model inclusive policies and practices as they envision and sustain international student engagement and success. Students with diverse language and cultural backgrounds, like the international students who participated in this study, should be viewed and treated as assets to the ever-increasingly multicultural and multilingual American higher education landscape considering cultural and academic impacts on all students, both privileged and minoritized, let alone economic contributions to the local and national economy (Lee et al., 2019).

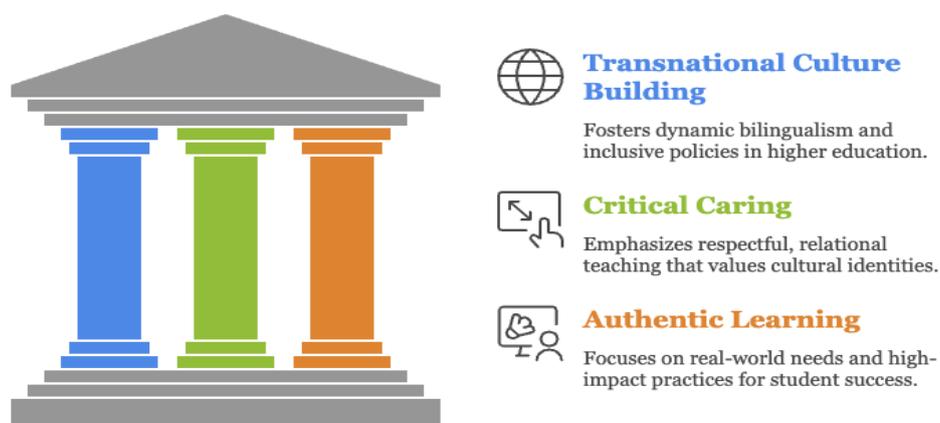


Figure 2. Principles of the Critical International Language Pedagogy (CILP) (Kim, 2016)

As shown in the results section of this study, international students are highly motivated and self-efficacious learners, investing for learning and development and navigating the new environments with self-directed learning strategies. This is illustrated by the story of Divya, the female education major from India and a multilingual speaker of Telugu, Hindi, and English, who student-taught academic writing to her multilingual peers who then completed their course writing assignments successfully owing to Divya's cultural bridge and tutor.

This story of peer-to-peer impact exemplifies the promise of building transnational culture within peer groups, classes, and beyond. Divya saw her multilingual background as a "strength" that distinguished her as "very strong compared to my/[her] American peers". The sound of promise is amplified with Eunji's story as she critiqued the existing curriculum in that "the most of art history is focused on western art history" and Eunji envisioned to "shift a little gear to Korean art history for Asian art history". Divya's and Eunji's intentional, expansive engagement contributes to building transnational culture on the campus with the internationalization mission, realizing cosmopolitan learning (Rizvi, 2009), which each person living in the globally connected space should do to understand dynamic cultural diversity.

CILP Principle 2: Critical Caring

The next interconnected CILP principle of critical caring (Kim, 2016) drawn on Nodding's caring pedagogy (2005), is centered on effective educators' conscious, relational pedagogies that feature modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. This critical caring guideline overlaps with the premise of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) that emphasizes the strong student-teacher relationships built on students' cultural identities and lived experiences, leading to creating a space that fosters students' dialogic collaboration, sense of belonging, and academic success. To apply culturally responsive critical caring, educators should model respectful and intellectual behavior using students' cultural frames of reference and relevant materials; they should listen fully and actively to students' thoughts being developed to build trusting relationships and create genuine opportunities to collaborate among culturally diverse peers; they should create sufficient opportunities in and out of the classroom to actively practice care, for example, via peer mentoring, to externalize and internalize care; they should affirm the best possible assets in each student to motivate them to aim higher, instead of mere positive reinforcement.

Culturally responsive critical caring is amply exemplified in the stories of Damin and Joe in this study, two peer mentors both with minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds and pursuing their doctorate degrees in humanities. First, Damin modeled and shared academic genre language and templates to help her mentees to "understand how to sort of write in academic discourses". Second, Joe's determined active listening to listen fully to ensure his mentee felt "totally understood" is a clear dialogue example. Third, Divya's student-teaching as a cultural bridge and tutor can be understood as a practice extended from the interaction with peer mentors. Then, confirmation of students' best selves was effectively communicated when Joe's scaffolded teacher talk prioritized mentees' own ideas over surface-level grammar or vocabulary entries and aimed for mentees to "take ownership" and to ensure their papers are "authentic to them".

CILP Principle 3: Authentic Learning

The third interconnected CILP principle of authentic learning (Kim, 2016) pushes multicultural language educators to meet students' real-world needs. The focus on authentic needs aligns well with the principles of high-impact practices, designed to promote deep learning and data-proven to enhance college and career success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Kuh, 2008). According to these originators of the high-impact practices (HIPs), higher education educators should provide educational activities that "involve substantial investments of students' time and effort, structured opportunities for knowledge application, reflection, and integrative thinking, meaningful contacts with faculty and peers, interactions with diverse others, chances for learning outside of the classroom, high performance standards, and public demonstrations of competence" (Lee et al., 2024, p. 181). The expanded HIPs model (Lee et al., 2024) consists of academic/sociocultural engagement, study abroad, foreign language, advanced writing/math, student teaching, research, co-op/internship, and volunteering that are the strong predictors on college and career success.

Findings of this study argue that a culturally responsive peer mentorship is an integrated high-impact practice that

involves academic/sociocultural engagement, study abroad, foreign language, advanced writing, and student teaching. Ngozi's journey to take substantial time and energy to voluntarily visit the writing center to work with diverse peer mentors, Joe and Damin, was "more than just academic writing for me/[her]...It has been a discovery" that she earned with new knowledge application, reflection and integrative thinking. As discussed earlier, changing from deficit assimilation to self-transformation (Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2017) was mutual, both mentees and mentors. Ngozi and Damin both spoke publicly as panelists siding with esteemed faculty leaders and they demonstrated their transformed selves successfully during the institution-wide International Education Week event on international student engagement and success. Then, both were proudly featured on the student-run campus newsletter as international student advocates.

Conclusion

This study, grounded on an integrated theoretical framework encompassing ecological, culturally responsive teaching, high-impact practices, and self-transformation perspectives, explored the exemplary case of culturally responsive peer mentorship grounded in nuanced lived experiences of minoritized international college students and their peer mentors on academic writing in English. The findings highlight the asset-based approach toward the minoritized globally mobile student population and echo the enduring call for accomplishing equity and excellence in international higher education (Kim, 2016). Key themes from this study feature international student strengths as highly motivated, invested, and self-efficacious learners employing self-directed learning strategies as they navigate the dynamically intertwined and often hidden layers of ecological systems that influence the tension between other-perceived barriers, notably internalized by students, and self-perceived cultural challenges, importantly negotiated by the student agents while growing their writers' authentic voice and power. Interconnected themes also include the power of culturally responsive peer mentoring evidenced as an integrated high-impact practice that offers fostering deeper engagement via active listening and trust building and utilizing students' diverse cultural backgrounds as growth resources, and providing tailored scaffolded language feedback and support through modeling academic genre language and focusing on macro issues over surface-level grammatical error analysis, collectively leading to mentees' and mentors' mutual transformations.

Recommendations

Based on the key findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed. First, colleges and universities of international higher education must work responsibly to reframe the deficit-based narrative and build the asset-based discourse. Recognizing international students' strengths only does not suffice; it needs to involve awareness-knowledge-skills-action training to create a meaningful, systemic change at individual-level, group-level, and institution-level, drawing on the multicultural organizational development and multicultural competence development models (Pope et al., 2014; 2019). Targeted feedback and support must not be regarded as a remedy but as an academic and sociocultural innovation. Second, tertiary education institutions must integrate culturally responsive teaching into all academic writing courses and other curricular and extra-curricular activities. This reform effort should reset writing from a set of rigid rules to be complied with to a spectrum of flexible, culturally-connected rhetorical practices. Third, schools must make a deliberate, sustained investment in creating

and maintaining effective peer mentoring programs that specifically recruit, train, and develop culturally responsive peer mentors and leaders. Also, new culturally responsive teaching initiatives must leverage opportunities to access and utilize emerging technologies including generative artificial intelligence and other innovative tools that may further enhance the power of expert-engineered, high-impact practices. Future studies should explore the long-term impacts of culturally responsive peer mentoring programs equipped with emerging technologies on the holistic student life trajectory inclusive of college and career success, tracking student sense of belonging, academic achievement, persistence, degree completion, 21st century core competencies, and employment status.

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Notes

Figure 1 and Figure 2 were generated by the author using the AI tool Napkin.ai.

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