Sociolinguistic Accommodation Strategies Utilized by International Student-Athletes: Communication Accommodation Theory & ISAs

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Sociolinguistic Accommodation Strategies Utilized by International Student-Athletes & their Interlocutors

Abstract (EN): An international student-athlete (ISA) is a foregin student who is living abroad in the United States and competing in a sport at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institution. These students are unique, as they face the challenges inherent in both of these roles. Utilizing communication accommodation theory (CAT) as a theoretical framework, 15 current ISAs were interviewed as part of a descriptive case study to observe the sociolinguistic accommodation behaviors employed by ISAs and memebers of their teams throughout their collegiate journeys. Findings revealed high levels of linguistic convergence were required of ISAs, as interpretability and emotional expression were the two major communication strategies used by others when speaking with ISAs. Implications of these communicative practices and the role they play in helping ISAs assimilate are discussed.

Keywords (up to 5): *communication accomodation theory, sociolinguistic accomodation, sports administration, sports management, communication.*

Estratégias de Acomodação Sociolinguística Utilizadas por Estudantes-Atletas Internacionais

Resumo (PT): Um estudante-atleta internacional (ISA) é um estudante estrangeiro que está frequentando uma universidade nos Estados Unidos e competindo em um esporte em uma instituição da National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Estes estudantes são especiais, pois lidam com ambos os desafios herdados. Utilizando a teoria de acomodação comunicativa (CAT) como enquadramento teórico, 15 ISAs atuais foram entrevistados como parte de um estudo de caso descritivo para observar os comportamentos de acomodação sociolinguística empregados pelos ISAs ao longo de suas jornadas universitárias. Os resultados revelaram altos níveis de convergência lingüística, tanto no vocabulário usado pelos ISAs em seus discursos ao descrever seus relacionamentos e experiências em seus papéis, quanto na explicação de suas afiliações grupais. As implicações dessas práticas comunicativas e suas responsabilidades em ajudar os ISAs são assimiladas e discutidas.

Palavras-chave (max. 5): teoria da acomodação comunicativa, acomodação sociolinguística, administração desportiva, gestão desportiva, comunicação.

This article is based on a doctoral dissertation titled, "The Complex Identities of International Student-Athletes Competing in the NCAA," presented by Dr. Hayden Coombs at Northcentral University in December 2022. This article contains new data and a different theoretical framework than the aforementioned study.

Introduction

Utilizing communication accommodation theory (CAT) as a theoretical framework, 15 ISAs at an NCAA-member institution were interviewed as part of a descriptive case study to observe the sociolinguistic accommodation behaviors employed by ISAs and some of their interlocutors throughout their collegiate journeys. Findings revealed high levels of linguistic convergence, both in the vocabulary ISAs used in speech describing their relationships and experiences in their roles and in the explanation of their group affiliations. Implications of these communicative practices and the role they play in helping ISAs assimilate are discussed. The utilization of CAT to explicate the experiences of ISAs fills a gap in the current and growing literature on ISAs.

1. International Student-Athletes

An international student-athlete (ISA) is a student who qualifies as both an international student living abroad in the United States and a student-athlete competing in a sport at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)-member institution (Coombs, 2022). These students are unique, as they face the challenges inherent in both of these roles (Bentzinger, 2016; Charitonidi & Kaburakis, 2022; Coombs, 2022). Although ISAs typically arrive in the country better prepared for the academic challenges compared to their domestic student-athlete (DSA) counterparts (Forbes-Mewett & Pope, 2019), ISAs are shown to drop out of college prior to completing their degrees at higher rates because of the substantial challenges they face adjusting to life at an American college (Popp et al., 2010). ISA participation in the NCAA has grown annually since 2014 (NCAA, 2021). This growth rate illustrates how urgently coaches and administrators rely on these students.

1.1. Regional and Cultural Differences of ISAs

ISAs possess a unique view of the purpose of participation in sports compared to DSAs (Bentzinger, 2016; Jones et al., 2008; Popp et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2015). Popp et al.

(2009) assessed these differences and indicated that DSAs tend to see intercollegiate athletic participation as the pinnacle of competition, prioritizing it more than ISAs (Bentzinger, 2016; Popp et al., 2009). These findings may explain some of the impact on ISA socialization and transition issues.

For many prospective ISAs, the NCAA model is unfamiliar (Bentzinger, 2016; Popp et al., 2009). Many prospective ISAs are often unaware of the option to study and compete in the United States until they are in high school (Bentzinger, 2016) and often don't have different perceptions about schools, which can have a large impact on where they decide to attend (Bentzinger, 2016). Furthermore, ISAs often make these decisions based solely on a small list of schools that have offered them scholarships (Bentzinger, 2016). Due to an ISA's inability to frequently visit campuses during recruitment, Bentzinger (2016) found that they place significant importance on factors such as the personalities of the coaching staff. Likewise, because domestic student-athletes can go on campus visits often, they have greater levels of accessibility to schools than ISAs do. Thus, institution factors such as regional location, academic programs offered, and campus amenities are of much higher importance to domestic athletes than international student-athletes (Bentzinger, 2016; Popp et al., 2011).

Another significant difference separating ISAs from their domestic counterparts is the NCAA eligibility process. An amateur athlete is someone who does not have a written or verbal agreement with an agent, has not profited above their actual and necessary expenses, or gained a competitive advantage in their sport (NCAA, 2022). The most widespread definition of amateur sport is based on those individuals who practice sport casually for pure pleasure and not by profession (Rocco, 2021). The NCAA guidelines mandate that to be eligible for athletic competition, a student-athlete must be an amateur and have at no time received unnecessary compensation for their sporting abilities (NCAA, 2022). Because of this, the NCAA Eligibility Center is forced to repeatedly research the structure of an ISA's educational systems and relate them to the American educational system and investigate what to do if an individual has lived in multiple countries (Bentzinger, 2016). This investigation includes determining if an ISA employed a manager while part of a club system, worked with agents, or was compensated for their abilities (Bentzinger, 2016). These decisions are why ISA amateurism issues make up 90% of violations found by the NCAA Eligibility Center (Bentzinger, 2016). Before the creation of the NCAA Eligibility Center, the responsibility of regulating eligibility fell to

the colleges that were recruiting the ISAs (Covell & Walker, 2021). As the number of ISAs grew and colleges proved untrustworthy or unable to complete the process, the NCAA was forced to take over the process (Weight & Zullo, 2016). During this time, many NCAA employees who were directly involved with the transition admitted that the process was rife with issues, as the NCAA was simply unprepared for the amount of applications that were submitted during the Eligibility Center's first year of existence (Covell & Walker, 2021). Among the problems that arose during the transition was how NCAA rules and regulations created for DSAs were being applied globally (Ridpath, 2018; Ridpath et al., 2019). Subsequently, the NCAA's amateurism cabinet was forced to loosen many of the stricter definitions of amateurism within the NCAA's legislation regarding prospective ISAs, as the NCAA's definitions regarding amateurism and participation with foreign professional teams were considered to be excessively broad and unjustifiable punitive to prospective ISAs who had never meant to forego their amateur status (Covell & Walker, 2021).

1.2. Adjustment and Transitional Issues Facing ISAs

In the late 2000s to mid-2010s, Nels Popp published a series of articles about ISAs and cultural adjustment. Throughout his research, Popp found that ISAs form a stronger attachment to their institutions than other international students (2007; Popp et al., 2010; Pierce et al., 2012). In 2009, Popp and his associates found that ISAs view the university athletic experience as more than just a sporting endeavor, sometimes causing them to de-emphasize the athletic component while emphasizing other aspects of the university experience (Popp et al., 2009). In 2011, Popp continued his research alongside various colleagues to learn how international and domestic student-athletes compare colleges during the recruitment process. They found that ISAs rated the overall reputation and academic perception of a school significantly lower than DSAs (Popp et al., 2011). In 2012, Popp and colleagues found that homesickness and adjustment to the U.S. culture were the most challenging hurdles for international athletes (Peirce et al., 2012). The most important elements to a successful transition for ISAs were a robust support system from teammates and coaches and friends and family in their native country (Pierce et al., 2012). A quarter of the respondents reported learning about athletic opportunities from coaches in the U.S., while an equal number of respondents learned about these opportunities from friends, family, and other athletes (Pierce et al., 2012). Key discoveries from this study included current ISAs reporting that prospective ISAs need to realize that playing sports

in the U.S. requires important traits like focus, dedication, hard work, and persistence to succeed (Pierce et al., 2012).

More recently, Emily Newell has focused her research on supporting ISAs during their transition into life as college students in the U.S. Based on previously conducted research, in 2015, Newell created a support model explicitly designed to assist with adjustment issues ISAs may face. This model covered topics including homesickness, adjusting to U.S. culture, language barrier, adjustment to competing demands, coping with athletic success or failure, socialization, dealing with the end of one's athletic career, and adjusting to U.S. education (Newell, 2015). Because the ISA transition is affected by both academic and athletic factors, practitioners from both academics and athletics must work together to provide advising and support services that address the issues specific to ISAs (Newell, 2015). In 2016, Newell revised her model to provide additional guidance to advisors and coaches of ISAs, further distancing the literature existing between ISAs and the general international student population. Newell found that a statistically significant difference exists between the needs of ISAs and non-athlete international students on items related to the transition to college and sources of academic, personal, and athletic support (2016).

1.3. *Socio-Economic Issues Facing ISAs*

In 2021, Manwell et al. studied Hispanic ISAs competing in NCAA Division I sports through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). This study revealed several socioeconomic factors that impact Hispanic ISAs. Despite all participants having substantial experience with the English language before coming to the United States, language was the predominant theme that made the collective experience most difficult (Manwell et al., 2021). The Hispanic ISAs reported experiencing new situations daily, constantly making cultural adaptations, such as linguistic changes like translating in their heads, decoding slang and humor, and having trouble keeping up with the pace of conversations (Manwell et al., 2021). The Hispanic ISAs also reported that language deficiencies in social situations caused significant anxiety (Manwell et al., 2021). The pursuit of balance was another intense adjustment, and the Hispanic ISAs struggled to adapt to different cultural mindsets, new demands between academic and athletic workloads, and having less time for socializing (Manwell et al., 2021). The Hispanic ISAs also reported struggling with cultural adaptation. The theme of cultural adaptation encompassed themes including independence, individualism, physical closeness, food, environment, athletics, and

academics. Many Hispanic ISAs also grew up in ultra-urban environments such as Madrid, Spain, Santiago, Chilie, and Mexico City, Mexico before moving to the U.S. to attend colleges in small towns or rural settings, which was reported to be a significant challenge (Manwell et al., 2021). From a political perspective, several participants acknowledged varying degrees of stereotyping that they had not faced before but experienced in the U.S. due to their nationality or language, including comments about drug use, migrant workers, and teammates failing to acknowledge the differences between European and South American Hispanic countries (Manwell et al., 2021).

Despite a supportive social network proving extremely useful for navigating a new environment, imbalance still existed in the lives of the Hispanic ISAs due to discontinuity between the demands of being an intercollegiate student-athlete and ingrained cultural identities (Manwell et al., 2021). In today's globalized economy, cultural sensitivity is essential, and understanding and knowing about cultural differences is a crucial skill for success in any field (Orejan, 2021). Ignorance of cultural differences can result in missed opportunities, reputational damage, legal challenges, productivity losses, expatriate failure, and the premature termination of partnerships (Orejan, 2021). The misunderstandings, tensions, and biases caused by cultural differences can even lead to outright failure (Orejan, 2021). Understanding language nuances, etiquette, and cultural time management differences can help navigate many complex interactions (Brown, 2019).

1.4. Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) attempts to explain how and why people adjust their communicative behaviors dependent on the actions of others (Giles, 2016). Factors of communication accommodation include verbal actions, such as accent, speech rate, volume, vocabulary, grammar, and voice, as well as non-verbal actions such as gestures, posture, and body movement (Dragojevic et al., 2015). People may accommodate their communicative behaviors to set a specific image, such as receiving approval and setting a positive image in front of the other party.

CAT posits that there are three types of accommodation processes: convergence, divergence, and maintenance (Gallois et al., 2005). Convergence is the process by which a person adapts or makes a mutual adjustment to another's communicative behaviors in order to reduce social differences (Giles & Gasiorek, 2013). Divergence is the process by

which a person contradicts or moves apart from another's communicative behaviors in order to emphasize any social differences (Giles & Gasiorek, 2013). Convergence and divergence can be mutual or nonmutual (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Mutual convergence and ? divergence occurs when both communicators come together or go apart mutually (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Nonmutual divergence occurs when one person attempts to converge while the other chooses to diverge (Littlejohn et al., 2021). A third adjustment, maintenance, has come to refer to a person remaining in their level of communication and not adjusting to others (Elhami, 2020).

CAT identifies five sociolinguistic strategies, including approximation, interpretability, interpersonal control, discourse management, and emotional expression (Farzadnia & Giles, 2015). Each of these strategies can be applied to the communicative experiences of ISAs. Approximation occurs when one speaker adjusts their speech patterns (pitch, tone, rate, etc.) to accommodate another speaker (Weizheng, 2019). Somewhat similar to approximation is interpretability, which is the "modification of complex speech by decreasing the diversity of vocabulary, increasing clarity by changing pitch and tempo and repetition, and the choice of topic to stay in familiar areas for the other person" (Ayoko et al., 2002, p. 168-169). One can imagine how approximation and interpretability would occur in the coach-athlete relationship, especially when there are linguistic differences between the two speakers. A coach native to the United States, for example, might explain a concept or strategy to a non-native athlete slower, and in a different tone than he or she would to a DSA.

Interpersonal control refers to "moves that highlight the status and role of the other interlocutor in the conversation, such as the use of interruptions, directives, or honorifics." (Pines et al., 2021, p. 66). Interpersonal control often happens when there is an apparent power dynamic between the ISA and the other interlocutor. For example, if a teammate of the ISA who happens to be an upperclassman and has seniority in the relationship may utilize this approach in order to make the conversation more comfortable for themselves. The potential issues with this may seem obvious, as a more timid ISA may not express their lack of comprehension in such a situation.

Discourse management includes "feedback elicitations, backchannels, topic control, asking and answering questions, and use of turn-taking." (Odhiambo, 2022, p. 17-18). This strategy can be especially useful for ISAs who are not only learning how to live life in an unfamiliar environment, but are also trying to learn team strategies and implement

coaching advice into their craft. Simple questions like, "does that make sense?", and asking for feedback can help to alleviate the added stress that ISAs experience.

Finally, emotional expression involves "interactants responding to the emotional or relational needs of the other person, including reassurance, and support." (Jones et al., 2018, p. 177). As ISAs navigate their new situations, they are more often than not doing so at a young age. Feelings of homesickness, uncertainty, and loneliness are normal, and emotional expression can be very beneficial during these tough transitions.

It is with these five sociolinguistic strategies in mind that we approached the current study. The methods, expanded on below, were used to better understand how ISAs deal with and adjust to life in the United States, and gain clarity on how these sociolinguistic strategies are used (or not used) either by ISAs or those around them. The research questions were:

RQ1: What are the common accommodating behaviors utilized by ISAs?

RQ2: What are the common accommodating behaviors utilized by those who frequently communicate with ISAs?

2. Method

The research methodology and design of this study consisted of a qualitative case study and was used to explore the adaptive communicative behaviors of ISAs competing in NCAA Division I athletics. The aim of the study was to address an existing gap in the literature, specifically identifying the common communicative adjustments ISAs made to communicate with classmates, teammates, and coaches more effectively . A qualitative single case study was selected for this research because it is exploratory and contains descriptive questioning, which provided rich data through personal experiences and feedback (Yin, 2018). Case studies provide researchers with an opportunity for greater depth of understanding of an issue (Stake, 2010). The single case study allows for researchers to make an in-depth examination, observing and listening for contextual information from multiple perspectives (Coombs, 2022) of the common behavioral adjustments ISAs made to communicate with their peers. Case studies incorporate exploratory measures to identify and address a particular phenomenon (Stake, 1995). The case study design is preferred as a research strategy when "how," "why," and "what"

questions are the interest of the researcher (Yin, 2018), as is the case of this research. Moreover, case study research is appropriate when a researcher's goals are to examine a contemporary issue that involves real-life topics (Yin, 2016).

2.1. Population and Sample

The sample for this study is composed of ISAs competing in NCAA Division I athletics, including men's basketball, women's basketball, football, women's soccer, and women's golf. ISAs currently attending Western US State University (WUSU), a pseudonym being used to protect identities, will serve as the research participants. WUSU was chosen because of the number of current ISAs, the variety of ISAs' listed home countries, the variety of sports in which ISAs are currently competing, and the willingness of the WUSU Athletic Department to help facilitate recruitment of research participants.

The sample of 15 ISAs included student-athletes participating in men's basketball, women's basketball, football, men's ice hockey, track and field, women's golf, women's soccer, and women's volleyball. These ISAs were from various countries, including Australia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sweden, Senegal, Canada, Nigeria, Thailand, American Samoa, Latvia, and Iceland. This study was guided by the communication accommodation theory, which influenced the formation of the research and interview questions. Purposive sampling was used from this population to collect data until saturation was reached (Young & Casey, 2019). This non-random sampling technique was most appropriate for this methodology and design because it provided rich data through participant perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ramlo, 2020) and helped to identify the adaptive communicative behaviors of ISAs competing in NCAA Division I athletics.

2.2. Limitations

Limitations are present in all investigative studies, which can refute research findings (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first and most relevant limitation of this study is that it focuses exclusively on ISAs who compete at the NCAA Division I level, and does not address the experiences of ISAs at other levels of collegiate athletics, including Division II, Division III, the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics, or the National Junior College Athletic Association This research seeks to provide a better understanding of the ISA experience at the Division I level. Rather than evaluating any single coach, team, or institution, this research sought to identify the the sociolinguistic

accommodation behaviors employed by ISAs and memebers of their teams throughout their collegiate journeys. In the future, it could be beneficial to research the sociolinguistic accommodation behaviors of ISAs at the other levels of collegiate athletics. A second limitation is the participant pool was composed of ISAs attending WUSU. While the impact of this limitation can be minimized by including ISAs from multiple countries and nationalities, this limitation is tied directly to the assumption that the participants will be an accurate representation of all ISAs attending NCAA Division I institutions. Because of the presence of study limitations, data triangulation must be utilized to authenticate participant response consistencies by maintaining a logical sequence of events that were followed throughout the study (Fusch et al., 2018).

3. Results

This study utilized a qualitative, descriptive case study to analyze the adaptive communicative behaviors of ISAs competing in NCAA Division I athletics. After sending out a recruitment email to the WUSU Assistant Athletic Director of Academics, 27 ISAs volunteered to participate in the study. However, only 15 participants were interviewed before data saturation was reached.

3.1. Sociolinguistic Accommodation Strategies

As outlined above, sociolinguistic adjustment can be conceptualized in terms of its focus or goal relative to a conversational partner's needs and characteristics (Coupland et al., 1988), in at least five ways. These five methods include approximation, interpretability, interpersonal control, discourse management, and emotional expression (Farzadnia & Giles, 2015). Each of these five strategies were found to be used consistently by the ISA participants who were interviewed and/or those who communicated most frequently with them, although to varying degrees. Examples of each sociolinguistic adjustment strategy are provided.

3.1.1. Approximation

Approximation occurs when one speaker adjusts their speech patterns to accommodate another speaker (Weizheng, 2019). Effective communication involves adjusting verbal and nonverbal behaviors to enhance your partner's comprehension (Dragojevic et al., 2015). ISAs frequently reported others, including coaches, teammates, and professors, using this strategy during their first year of college.

One ISA illustrated this concept when discussing how people addressed her during her freshman year, and how she responded in kind:

> During my freshman year, the first few months I was in the states, I thought it was funny and also a little bit frustrating that people would be able to tell that I was from abroad just by hearing me say hi or hello. So, I would sometimes experiment with how I talked and make my pitch higher, and smile a lot more, to try to fit in better.

Another ISA utilized approximation in order to gain a perceived authority with his teammates:

> I was really young when I got (to the U.S.), only 17 years-old. I can recall occasionally lowering my voice pitch to deepen my voice. I did this to be more respected amongst my teammates, because I was the youngest guy on the team, and also a late-bloomer. I tried to make myself sound older, more like the other guys.

Native English-speaking ISAs also reported approximation strategies present in their daily communication.

> Back home in Australia, it's a lot more friendly. Like you'll say, 'hey,' to a random person walking down the street. And here, it's more like, you keep your distance. I used to get weird looks all the time. The first couple of weeks, I was here saying hi to everybody and my teammates were like, 'we don't do that here,' so I've been adjusting to just keeping to myself and minding my own business when I'm out in public instead of saying hello to everybody.

3.1.2. Interpretability

The second sociolinguistic adjustment tactic, interpretability, occurs when interactants focus on their partners' ability to comprehend what is being said by employing interpretability strategies (Ayoko et al., 2002). These strategies include decreasing the diversity of one's vocabulary, simplifying syntax, and becoming louder in an attempt to increase comprehension (Dragojevic et al., 2015). Interpretability strategies were reportedly used both by ISAs and by their teammates and coaches.

One ISA expressed frustration with others who employed interpretation strategies when she believed this behavior was unnecessary:

> I always was trying to talk with more diversity in my vocabulary and speak more like a local, but other people would speak more simple and slowly to make sure I was understanding. I recognize they were just trying to make sure I was keeping up, but I would get frustrated sometimes.

Again, native English-speaking ISAs also noticed interpretability strategies to help during initial adjustments, like one participant who said the following:

> Obviously, I have a different accent, but other than that, I can change anything about myself to fit in. Like, during the first few weeks, people would tease me about my accent, they still do actually, but the biggest adjustments are cultural things. Like, the general structure of school took a lot of adjusting and getting used to, but little things, too, like spelling. You guys don't use as many U's. And you say 'candy' instead of 'lollies'. No one told me I needed to change these things, I just kind of figured it out to fit in better.

3.1.3. Interpersonal Control

Interpersonal control occurs when speakers who are focused on role relationships within an interaction adopt linguistic strategies to remind the partner of their relative status or role (Dragojevic et al., 2015). Interpersonal control often occurs when a power dynamic exists between the communicators (Pines et al., 2021). Interpersonal control was a frequent strategy employed by the ISA participants and those around them.

One ISA noticed hierarchical practice and team structures that were reinforced by interpersonal control:

> In hockey there is such a thing as 'The Court.' It is a weekly meeting where the upperclassmen sit on one side of the room and the freshmen on the other. Then the freshmen have to answer for anything the veterans accuse them of. It can be anything starting from bad style to a reckless penalty in a game. The positioning of this meeting really emphasized the power dynamics between the older guys and the younger guys, and I remember it was hard to protest against anything because of (their higher status).

Another ISA noted that she would intentionally and carefully be sure to use proper language when dealing with her superiors:

> Whenever I would talk to someone who was higher than me in the hierarchy, like professors, my coaches, or older teammates, I would always make sure that I was polite and unimposing.

An ISA mentioned how those who employed linguistic power dynamics could help her with initial adjustment:

> When I first got here, it was the older girls on the team and one of my assistants who helped me go grocery shopping and set up a bank account. I remember who stepped up in team meetings and said they'd help take care of me. They kind of taught me how things worked here, so I just followed their lead.

3.1.4. Discourse Management

Discourse management occurs when speakers are focused on their partners' macro-conversational needs (Dragojevic et al., 2015). Discourse management was especially useful for ISAs as they learned unfamiliar customs and implemented coaching and training techniques into their craft. Asking for feedback helped clarify potential opportunities for miscommunication.

One participant commented on asking a lot of questions during practice to make sure they were understanding everything correctly:

> Whether we were in training or in film, when I was new here I had to ask lots and lots of questions. Like, my coaches could explain something to me that I understand now, but back during my first few months or first year with the team, what they said could mean something completely different back home. So, I was always sure to repeat what they said the way I understood it and be like, 'Did I get that right?' or, 'Is this what you meant?'.

Another participant mentioned how feedback elicitations helped him understand jokes and slang:

> Sometimes my teammates could tell that I didn't really understand or whatever, so they would say things slower for the second time to make sure I knew what was going on.

One participant mentioned that teammates showing an interest in their culture and asking questions during conversation helped them adjust to their new culture.

> I think having my teammates around has really helped me adjust to the American culture. Like, the other day we had a discussion of Celsius and Fahrenheit and why one's better and one's not. Stupid stuff like that where they explain to me how things work (in the United States).

3.1.5. Emotional Expression

Emotional expression involves "interactants responding to the emotional or relational needs of the other person, including reassurance and support" (Jones et al., 2018, p. 177). Most ISAs are forced to navigate their new living situations and cultures at a relatively young age, as most begin college at age 18. Feelings of homesickness, uncertainty, and loneliness are found to accompany this transition (Coombs, 2022). Emotional expression is an important and beneficial sociolinguistic strategy to employ during these difficult transitions (Jones et al., 2018).

Speaking on emotional expression one participant commented specifically on expanding her vocabulary:

> I definitely learned more emotional vocabulary in order to emotionally support my friends and teammates whenever they had tougher times, and I feel like they probably did the same thing to support me.

Other participants focused their comments on the ability to express their emotions due to their relationships with their teammates, as seen in the following quote:

> I enjoy my relationships with my teammates because it's, like, bidirectional, if that makes sense. Like, I affect them and they affect me, too. Like, I can teach them a bit about life outside of the US, but they're the ones teaching me how things work here and what's normal. I'd be lost if they weren't looking out for me.

Similar sentiments were expressed about coaches and administrators who went out of their way to provide reassurance and support:

> The coaching and administration side of the team was very supportive whenever I had any issues. My teammates were always there for me as well, so I felt free to express what I felt. Every one of them on the team was living away from home, so we all experienced similar feelings. These interactions mostly happened outside of practice and school during off-time.

4. Discussion

One of the main findings from the current study was that interpretability and emotional expression were the two major communication strategies used by others when speaking with ISAs. Although all five strategies were documented, interpretability and emotional expression were reported almost unanimously among the 15 ISA participants.

Interpretability was the most commonly-reported communication accommodation tactic. Unsurprisingly, some of the ISAs actually found this tactic frustrating. Other scholars have noted this frustration in similar studies, such as Zhang and Giles (2018) who posit that the careful annunciation and slow speaking can be condescending to non-native speakers. As explained by Giles and Ogay (2007) "Downward convergence… might be perceived by students as suspicious, inappropriate or even condescending" (p. 302). Of course, interpretability has many positives as well. For example, ISAs reported feeling cared about when others would make efforts to accommodate their communication, even if it was downward convergence.

To use interpretability effectively, it is important that both ISAs and those they are communicating with approach dialogue with a spirit of openness, empathy, and cultural awareness. Perhaps the best way to magnify the positives of interpretability without

alienating the recipient of the downward convergence, is to couple interpretability with emotional expression.

Emotional expression involves "interactants responding to the emotional or relational needs of the other person, including reassurance and support" (Jones et al., 2018, p. 177). One of the major transitional periods facing emerging adults is the adjustment to college life (Newell, 2016). Most ISAs are forced to navigate their new living situations and cultures at a relatively young age, as most begin college at age 18. Even when a transition is a positive experience, it has the capacity to have a negative impact on an individual's well-being, primarily because the process of change brings with it various challenges, such as changes in lifestyle and a sense of uncertainty (Haslam et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2018). Feelings of homesickness, uncertainty, and loneliness are found to accompany this transition (Coombs, 2022), and effective means of emotional expression are important and beneficial sociolinguistic strategies to employ during these difficult transitions (Jones et al., 2018).

Emotional expression is an important and effective strategy when seeking to make others feel important through comfortable and secure communication (Williams et al., 1999). Effective emotional expression can help one determine their emotions, such as experiencing depression after poor play, and behavior, such as discrimination against another team (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). The most common highly emotional experiences reported by ISAs were those issues related to homesickness. ISAs experiencing feelings of homesickness have been widely reported (Coombs, 2022; Newell, 2016; Vadopalaite-Witte, 2020). Examples of ISAs experiencing homesickness included ISAs withdrawing, spending excessive time video chatting or talking on the phone with family members, becoming overly emotional, and experiencing heightening stress due to isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Various ISAs commented on the efforts made by coaches, advisors, teammates, and administrators to ensure they were managing their emotions in healthy ways. When coaches and teammates went out of their way to check on them, the ISAs in turn felt more comfortable to express their emotions openly and honestly. Acts of emotional expression also lead to the ISAs bonding more closely with their teammates. A secondary effect of positive emotional expression was ISAs actively building their own emotional vocabulary in order to reciprocate the care they received from teammates and coaches. Multiple ISAs mentioned expanding their emotional vocabulary so they could provide the same support

that was provided to them. These reciprocal measures included offering emotional support for those who reached out to them, but also included preparing themselves to offer emotional support for future teammates and incoming freshmen. Emotional expression provided valuable comfort, bonding, and wellness benefits for the ISAs, which made it arguably the most impactful sociolinguistic adjustment strategy employed by ISAs.

5. Conclusion

Dragojevic et al. (2015) propose that speakers should use more than one communicative accommodation strategy synchronously. For example, a coach or teammate of an ISA could use simpler vocabulary and grammatical rules for better understanding in practice, while expressing reassurance and support during team and private meetings. Thus, those who interact with ISAs most frequently are using multiple sociolinguistic adjustment strategies simultaneously to ensure positive effective communication.

Sociolinguistic adjustment strategies are effective because they help individuals adapt their language and communication style to better fit the norms and expectations of their conversational partner or social context (Elhami, 2020). These strategies include convergence, where individuals adjust their language and communication style to be more similar to their conversational partner, or divergence, where they intentionally use language and communication style that emphasizes their differences (Gallois et al., 2005). Through these strategies, understanding of how language and communication style are used to express social identity and build relationships between individuals from different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds can be enhanced.

CAT is valuable for ISAs, coaches, teammates, and athletic administrators alike because it promotes effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and inclusivity, which can ultimately enhance the overall educational and social experience for ISAs. By applying the principles of CAT, ISA interlocutors not only foster an environment where ISAs feel valued and understood, but they also contribute to the development of strong interpersonal relationships. These relationships can be instrumental in providing the necessary support and guidance for ISAs adjusting to a new culture, leading to improved more enriching experiences throughout their collegiate journeys.

Future researchers should examine how individuals use these strategies to negotiate and manage their social identities, build trust and rapport with ISAs, and create more positive

interactions. By studying these strategies, researchers can gain insights into how accommodating communication strategies can facilitate intergroup communication for teams and groups of varying cultural backgrounds. The five sociolinguistic strategies of CAT (approximation, interpretability, interpersonal control, discourse management, and emotional expression) provide a valuable framework for understanding how communication shapes social identity and intergroup relationships.

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