At the intersections of ableism and linguicism: Stories from neurodivergent undergraduate students who speak English as an additional language

Aux intersections du capacitisme et du linguicisme : récits d'étudiantes et d'étudiants neurodivergents de premier cycle parlant l'anglais comme langue additionnelle

Rosa Dene David, Ph.D. Candidate
University of British Columbia
rosa.david@ubc.ca

Abstract

Higher education has often been framed as a necessary step for personal development, because a university education is seen as a gateway to a prosperous future. Yet, systemic ableism and exclusionary practices deeply affect the educational experiences and learning outcomes for students who are members of historically marginalized communities. For neurodivergent undergraduate students who speak English as an additional language (EAL), these barriers are compounded by institutional policies and practices that reinforce normative assumptions about ability and success. Teacher-centered approaches in higher education frequently exclude students whose non-normative ways of knowing, learning, and communicating differ from the "norm." This study explores the undergraduate experiences of Adela and Imani (pseudonyms), two neurodivergent EAL students. Their perspectives are drawn from five semi-structured narrative interviews. Together, their narratives illustrate systemic inequalities present in higher education, while also highlighting how intersecting structures of ableism, linguicism, and racism shape their academic trajectories. By situating their educational experiences within the broader North American post-secondary landscape, this research highlights how instructional policies and practices perpetuate marginalization and exclusion. It calls on educators and institutions to dismantle the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect neurodivergent EAL students and to foster more equitable learning environments.

Résumé

L'enseignement supérieur est souvent présenté comme une étape incontournable du développement personnel, l'éducation universitaire étant perçue comme une porte d'entrée vers un avenir prospère. Pourtant, le capacitisme systémique et les pratiques d'exclusion affectent profondément les expériences éducatives et les résultats d'apprentissage des étudiantes et étudiants issus de communautés historiquement marginalisées. Pour les personnes neurodivergentes inscrites au premier cycle et parlant l'anglais comme langue additionnelle, ces obstacles se trouvent amplifiés par des politiques et des pratiques institutionnelles qui renforcent des normes implicites en

matière de capacités et de réussite. Les approches pédagogiques centrées sur la personne enseignante dans l'enseignement supérieur tendent à exclure les étudiantes et étudiants dont les modes de connaissance, d'apprentissage et de communication non normatifs s'écartent des standards dominants. Cette étude explore les expériences universitaires d'Adela et Imani (pseudonymes), deux personnes neurodivergentes dont l'anglais est la langue additionnelle, à partir de cinq entretiens narratifs semi-structurés. Leurs récits mettent en lumière les inégalités systémiques qui traversent l'enseignement supérieur, tout en soulignant comment les structures croisées de capacitisme, de linguicisme et de racisme façonnent leurs trajectoires académiques. En situant leurs expériences dans le paysage plus large de l'enseignement postsecondaire nord-américain, cette recherche montre comment les politiques et pratiques pédagogiques perpétuent la marginalisation et l'exclusion. Elle appelle les enseignantes et enseignants, ainsi que les institutions, à démanteler les barrières systémiques qui affectent de manière disproportionnée les étudiantes et étudiants neurodivergents dont l'anglais est la langue additionnelle, et à promouvoir des environnements d'apprentissage véritablement équitables.

Introduction and Literature Review

Universities often present themselves as equitable and inclusive spaces for the diverse communities that they serve. Yet, current research suggests that vulnerable, under-resourced, and disadvantaged student communities often experience marginalization on university campuses, manifesting in the form of embedded disadvantages and systemic barriers that, in turn, prevent unequal access to university services, opportunities, and resources (Annamma et al., 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These systemic barriers are shaped by intersecting structures including ableism, linguicism, heteronormativism, racism, and sexism, that differentially shape students' access to educational resources and supports (David & Torres, 2020; Erevelles, 2011; Minich, 2016; Phillipson, 1986; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1986). These disparities can have lasting effects on students' academic trajectories and overall well-being. For neurodivergent students who speak English as an additional language (EAL), these challenges are further exacerbated by institutional frameworks that prioritize standardized academic English, rigid teaching methods, and bureaucratic systems that presuppose linguistic and cognitive uniformity.

There is an ongoing need for universities to develop supports for neurodivergent EALs, yet their collective educational experiences remain underexplored and insufficiently understood by members of the academic community. This limited understanding and lack of recognition highlight broader systemic issues that shape university approaches, policies, and practices (Evans et al., 2017). More specifically, archaic teacher-centered approaches continue to dominate many university classrooms, and while lectures fill

classroom auditoriums, these kinds of pedagogical approaches often harm and disadvantage students who engage with knowledge differently (Dolmage, 2017). For example, when classroom instruction relies heavily on spoken discourse neurodivergent EALs may experience difficulties processing, retaining, and attending to spoken language (Kormos & Smith, 2024). Additionally, monolingual ideologies that privilege standardized academic English frame linguistic diversity as a deficit rather than a resource (Flores & Rosa, 2015). These raciolinguistic ideologies compound the marginalization experienced by neurodivergent EALs. The expectation is that EALs should possess the same or similar linguistic proficiency as their 'native English-speaking' peers and therefore should be able to demonstrate their learning in similar ways (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1986). This perception also disregards how neurodivergent EALs engage with time. Institutional expectations around workload, deadlines, and language acquisition are shaped by normative temporalities that fail to account for the nonlinear ways neurodivergent learners may experience time (Henner & Robinson, 2023; Price; 2024).

Current scholarship suggests that disabled and neurodivergent university students often take longer to graduate, yet institutional funding and academic supports do not sufficiently mitigate these realities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Students from under-resourced and systemically marginalized communities often do not have the institutional knowledge needed to navigate the bureaucratic processes of accessing student services (Lightner et al., 2012; Newman & Madaus, 2015). For example, international students may encounter cultural and systemic obstacles and may not be able to access student services or obtain accommodations due to a lack of background

knowledge and documentation (Kormos & Smith, 2024). For many students, meeting

documentation requirements set by host country institutions can be complicated by

language differences, inconsistent diagnostic standards, or difficulties obtaining

healthcare records from their country of origin. Once in the host country, diagnostic

assessments are generally conducted exclusively in English, which may restrict the

accessibility of disability accommodations for EALs who lack an official diagnosis (Kormos

& Smith, 2024). Furthermore, neurodiversity is more widely diagnosed and acknowledged

in the Global North, creating additional systemic barriers for neurodivergent EALs who

relocate (Nair et al., 2024). Although the examples above are not exhaustive, together they

illustrate the kinds of systemic barriers that impact neurodivergent EALs' academic

success and overall well-being.

In the fields of applied linguistics, English language teaching, and foreign language

learning, research has explored the cognitive and affective dimensions of language

learning for neurodiverse English language learners (Csizér et al., 2010; Kormos, 2017;

Nijakowska, 2008). Though these research areas offer valuable insights, they are often

constrained by a focus on cognitive and pedagogical concerns rather than addressing

structural barriers that impede educational access (David & Brown, 2022). Moreover, this

kind of research examines the experiences of EAL learners through a narrow lens of second

language acquisition, or more specifically, positioning EALs as language learners, rather

than examining the complex realities of bilingualism or multilingualism (David & Brown,

2020, 2022). This framing often erases the fact that many neurodivergent EALs are not

solely language learners but are continuously communicating across different languages

to serve their various needs. The assumption that EALs are always in the process of developing language proficiency, rather than being positioned as active participants in different multilingual spaces, reinforces deficit-based narratives that obscure the agency and linguistic expertise of neurodivergent EALs (David & Brown, 2020; Flores, 2020). These narratives do not exist in isolation; instead, they are shaped by institutional structures that impose normative expectations of language and cognition, while at the same time failing to recognize the legitimacy of diverse ways of learning and communicating.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from CDS, the neurodiversity paradigm, and DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2016; Schalk, 2017; Shakespeare, 2018; Walker, 2021). Together, these interconnected, but epistemologically distinct frameworks challenge dominant, pathologizing, and deficit-based views on disability and neurodivergence within the sphere of higher education. They highlight how the university system constructs and enforces normative standards around race, language, and ability to systemically marginalize students whose identities and ways of navigating higher education do not align with dominant expectations. CDS critiques medicalized models of disability and examines the role of structural oppression and institutional ableism in shaping disabled students' experiences (Schalk, 2017; Shakespeare, 2018). CDS provides a framework for examining how bureaucratic processes function as gatekeeping mechanisms that restrict access to support. DisCrit expands on CDS by integrating a critical race analysis to explore the intersection of ableism and racism (Annamma et al., 2016; Schalk, 2022). This framework is particularly important for understanding the narratives of multilingual and racialized

students as it highlights how white normativity and able-bodiedness are co-constructed in educational systems (Annamma et al., 2016). In this study, DisCrit illustrates how language, race, and disability are entangled in the institutional marginalization of Adela and Imani.

The neurodiversity paradigm serves as an epistemological framework that (re)interprets neurological differences as inherent and valuable aspects of human diversity (Walker, 2021). Rather than framing neurodivergence as an obstacle to be remediated, the neurodiversity paradigm affirms alternative ways of being, learning, and engaging as valuable and necessary contributions to educational communities (Walker, 2021). It critiques how dominant educational structures equate compliance with competence, marginalizing students whose ways of learning and being fall outside institutional norms. This approach lays the groundwork for examining how neurodivergent EAL university students navigate approaches, policies, and practices.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do institutional barriers such as policies, pedagogical norms, and faculty attitudes shape Adela and Imani's experiences as neurodivergent EAL undergraduate students?

2. How do Adela and Imani experience and respond to the challenges of being neurodivergent EAL undergraduate students in higher education?

Methods

This study employs narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dwyer & emerald, 2017) to examine the undergraduate experiences of two neurodivergent EALs within the North American context. It is part of a larger study that investigated the educational and professional experiences of 15 neurodivergent EAL university students that focused on their educational backgrounds, academic trajectories, workplace experiences, and future aspirations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over one year, providing a longitudinal perspective on the participants' experiences. For Adela and Imani, approximately 18 hours of interview data were analyzed. Their narratives were intentionally selected for this project because their individual and collective experiences offer insights into how institutional approaches, policies, and practices shaped their undergraduate trajectories. Participants were invited to review and respond to how their narratives were represented in the analysis, and their feedback informed the final interpretations (Dwyer & emerald, 2017). By centering their voices, this study critically examines the structural barriers embedded within academic institutions.

Data Collection

The primary data source for this study was in-depth interview data, collected with informed consent under approved institutional ethics protocols. Interview protocols were based on guiding questions for each of the five interviews focusing on the participants' educational experiences and future aspirations. Interviews ranged in size and, on average, were between 90 and 150 minutes and provided insights into how neurodiversity, language, and additional intersecting factors shaped their academic and professional journeys. In the first interview, the participants reflected on their upbringing and their

primary education. The second interview focused on their experiences being neurodivergent and provided Adela and Imani the time and space to recount key memories and challenges that they faced during their primary and post-secondary education. In the third interview, the participants discussed their experiences learning English and how multilingualism has shaped their educational trajectory. During the fourth and fifth interviews, Adela and Imani reflected on their university experiences, including the academic and social challenges they faced, and examined whether their university education had prepared them for their future endeavors. This collection of interviews provided insights into how institutional barriers have shaped Adela and Imani's education.

Researcher Positionality

As a neurodivergent and bilingual researcher with lived experience in Global South and Global North institutions, I bring critical awareness of systemic ableism and linguicism. Though we come from different backgrounds, our shared experiences navigating institutional barriers shaped our dialogues. Throughout the research process, I maintained field notes, analytic memos, engaged peer debriefing, and invited participant input (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dwyer & emerald, 2017). This reflexive stance informed both analytic decisions and ethical commitments of this study.

Data Analysis

To describe Adela and Imani's undergraduate experiences, this study employed narrative inquiry as both a methodological approach and an analytical framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dwyer & emerald, 2017). The data were analyzed through an intersectional lens to examine how multiple social identities such as ability, class, gender

expression, language, and race can intersect and therefore influence an individual's educational opportunities (Annamma et al., 2016, Schalk, 2022; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). An intersectional analysis provided a more comprehensive understanding of how the individual experiences of the participants were influenced by ableism, discrimination, racialization, and linguicism in higher education, as a result of their intersecting and overlapping identities (Annamma et al., 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Each interview was iteratively reviewed and coded in three phases. During the initial phase, Adela and Imani's interview data were coded separately using an inductive, ground-up approach to identify overarching themes, language conventions signaling story initiation, and incomplete storylines that required follow-up in subsequent interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In the second phase, chronological coding was applied to examine how each participant understood their experiences through interaction, continuity, and situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A separate analysis was conducted to create an analytic abstraction to illuminate how Adela and Imani's lived experiences were situated within a larger sociocultural and sociohistorical framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To further this analysis, axial coding was employed to identify similarities and differences in Adela and Imani's educational journeys.

Site

The study was conducted at Cedar Ridge University (CRU; pseudonym), a large public institution located in southwestern Canada. CRU is described as a leader in teaching and research and is known for its commitment to internationalization. Like many public universities in Canada, CRU's student body reflects the country's changing

demographics. International students compose 28% of CRU's population with 60% identifying as BIPOC, 15% as 2SLGBTQIA+, and 25–48% as disabled or neurodivergent. These statistics illustrate the need for institutional policies, pedagogical approaches, and university supports to consider how disability and neurodiversity intersect with additional structural and social markers.

Participants

In the following section, we will explore the educational experiences of Adela and Imani, two students attending CRU. Their experiences offer two distinct yet intersecting perspectives on navigating the undergraduate experience as neurodivergent EALs.

Adela

Adela is from Latin America and grew up in a monolingual Spanish-speaking household. Adela began studying English during her primary studies but struggled in primary school to develop proficiency. Before attending university, Adela opted to study English in the United Kingdom so that she could complete her undergraduate degree in the United States. After completing her English studies, Adela moved to the southern region of the United States to pursue an undergraduate degree in education, and she spent four years in the region. After finishing her undergraduate degree, Adela returned to Latin America, where she worked at a private school. During this time, Adela had recently relocated to Canada to pursue post-secondary degree in special education. While not formally diagnosed, Adela has spent the entirety of her education studying special education, self-identifies as neurodivergent, and sees herself as someone who has ADHD.

Imani

Imani is in her early twenties and relocated to Canada from East Africa in 2021 to

pursue an undergraduate degree. At the time of this study, Imani was in the final year of her

undergraduate studies. Imani's first language is Luganda, though she experienced

language loss as English was prioritized in her formal education. Imani was raised in a

multilingual household, and throughout her primary education, she learned to speak

English, Swahili, French, and German. Imani identifies as neurodivergent and, since

arriving to Canada, has been diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, and depression, and has gone

through screening for a mood disorder.

Storied Experiences: Navigating Higher Education as Neurodivergent EAL Students

Adela: "I Don't Belong Anywhere"

Adela entered her undergraduate studies aware that her ways of learning and

engaging with academic work were different from institutional expectations. As a high

school student, Adela already had the impression that she didn't learn in the same ways as

her peers, but she was hopeful that after spending a year in the United Kingdom, she would

be prepared to pursue an undergraduate degree at an American institution. Adela

expressed that from the beginning of her undergraduate studies, she felt different from her

peers, sharing, "I didn't feel like I fit in. I didn't feel like talking to anybody. I felt like I wasn't

smart enough" (April 3, 2024). These institutional messages created isolation and were

further compounded by language variety and racial tensions in the region. Adela's

university was located in the Southern region of the US, and she mentioned that while

there was a large Spanish-speaking community, she never quite "fit in" because she didn't

identify as Chicana, and she spoke a different variety of English than her peers:

When I first moved to [the southern region of the US], I had a bit of a British accent.

So, that would put me on the spot. And people would be like, 'Oh, where are you

from?' And then me saying, '[Latin America],' and they were like, 'Oh, like, that's so

weird. Why do you have a British accent?' And 'Why is your skin so white if you're

[Latina]?' (April 3, 2024)

This demonstrates how linguistic hierarchies and racialized language expectations shaped

her sense of belonging (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Her British-accented English, instead of

being viewed as a marker of bilingualism, was perceived as suspicious or unnatural, which

in turn, reinforced raciolinguistic ideologies that racialized EALs are expected to conform

to the dominant linguistic and cultural expectations of the regions in which they reside

(Flores & Rosa, 2015). Adela described feeling isolated and wanting to be invisible as if she

was caught at the intersection of nationalism, racism, linguicism, and academic exclusion.

As a Latin American woman, she was perceived as "too white" to fit dominant racialized

expectations of Latinidad, yet as a Latina, her British-accented English marked her as an

outsider, further reinforcing her sense of unbelonging in both social and academic spaces.

This sense of exclusion was not solely confined to her social interactions, as these

same social categories had an impact on her overall well-being and were further

compounded by her learning experiences as a neurodivergent EAL. Adela experienced

overlapping structural barriers that made engagement and participation more difficult for

her, yet these challenges were misinterpreted by faculty members as a lack of effort, lack

of ability, or linguistic barriers. These barriers reflect broader patterns of linguicism, where

EAL students' struggles are attributed to a lack of linguistic proficiency rather than

systemic inaccessibility (Skutabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1986). Adela shared that these

instructional barriers were present within the classroom and often created a profound

sense of internalized self-doubt, as well as the constant fear of not being good enough.

These institutional pressures not only affected how Adela navigated academic spaces but

also how she believed others perceived her. Adela articulated that she "struggled a lot with

feeling confident or capable" (May 1, 2024). These institutional pressures meant that Adela

was constantly having to defend her capabilities and prove her belonging. Rigid course

structures and teacher-centered approaches, along with her interactions with faculty

members, reinforced Adela's feeling that "I'm not good enough to be here" (May 1, 2024).

This experience later fueled her commitment to special education and creating inclusive

learning environments.

She felt heightened awareness of her accent, and she shared that she deliberately

avoided participating in class due to her concerns about how she would be perceived by

her classmates and faculty alike. The pressure to speak in fluent, academic English

without making mistakes led her to rehearse her responses before speaking and took the

form of linguistic self-surveillance (Flores & Rosa, 2015). However, this constant rehearsal

of speech created additional barriers:

> Even when I felt like I knew English, I knew how to put sentences together, I would
>
> run it in my head so many times to make sure that I was using the right words and
>
> the correct grammar and the right pronunciation in my head that I would miss so
>
> many conversations. There were so many times that I wanted to say something, but
>
> I didn't just because I was scared of saying it wrong. (April 10, 2024)

This self-regulation of speech in academic spaces aligns with crip linguistics frameworks, which challenge the common assumption that spoken fluency measures a student's intelligence and ability to participate (Henner & Robinson, 2023). Such expectations can push neurodivergent EALs to engage in heightened self-monitoring to avoid potential judgment, especially in monolingual settings. Moreover, Adela's constant self-monitoring of her speech reinforced the anxiety she was experiencing, causing her to disengage from classroom discussion, creating further feelings of discomfort and distress. She described how these institutional pressures manifested physically, demonstrating the embodied impact of academic ableism:

> There were times that I was in class with my eyes full of tears, just because I didn't want to be there. And then just trying to be like, 'Okay, calm down. It's okay, just try to pay attention. This is something you find interesting.' But I couldn't. (May 1, 2024)

These experiences illustrate how the internalized pressure of institutionalized approaches, policies, and practices not only shaped how Adela engaged with learning but also dictated the extent to which she felt safe participating in academic spaces.

Adela also described feeling that different faculty members assumed that the barriers she was experiencing were related to language proficiency, rather than systemic barriers constructed by classroom instruction and rigid and inaccessible course structures. This reflects a broader institutional failure to recognize the intersection of neurodivergence and bilingualism. Students like Adela are often miscategorized as struggling solely because of linguistic challenges, rather than because of inequitable and inaccessible academic structures that are designed to privilege a narrow range of learning

styles (Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2011,2024). Adela shared that she did not feel safe disclosing her learning difficulties and feared that doing so would reinforce perceptions of incapability or inferiority. Instead, she would strategically frame her struggles in terms of experiencing severe anxiety. When Adela eventually decided to approach one of her faculty members to share with them that she was struggling with the course content, and rather than offer her support, the professor told Adela, "If you're struggling, just drop out because you need a certain grade to pass, and if you can't do that, then just drop out" (April 3, 2024). This represents academic survivalism in which students who struggle are encouraged to self-select out of higher education, rather than being given the educational supports, services, and resources they need to be able to effectively participate (Alshammari, 2019). Adela was simply told that she could either meet standardized expectations or leave.

Despite these institutional barriers, Adela persisted through her undergraduate degree and went on to complete a graduate degree in special education. Her navigation of these hostile academic environments, combined with her current expertise in special education, demonstrates both the harm of ableist academic structures and the resilience of students who transform their exclusionary experiences into good.

Imani: "I Was Just Trying to Survive"

Imani never planned to move to Canada, and if she had it her way, she would have attended university in the United Kingdom, where her brother lived. But her father insisted that Canada would offer more long-term opportunities. Before coming to Canada, Imani shared, "I didn't know anything about the country; I just knew they liked poutine and had a

red flag" (December 4, 2024). From the beginning, structural barriers shaped Imani's

undergraduate experience, starting with the English language proficiency exam she was

required to take as a part of her university application. As an East African woman, Imani

found this requirement problematic, as English holds official status in her country. "I'm

from a British colony, you know; we speak English. Our language of instruction is English …

But then, I had to take the Cambridge exam" [the International English Language Testing

System {IELTS}] (October 22, 2024). This reflects how racialized linguistic gatekeeping

often shapes the educational experiences of EALs whose variety of English is perceived as

inherently inferior or "nonstandard" (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Such

placement exams reinforce colonial ideologies about whose English is considered

acceptable, positioning multilingual speakers from the Global South as linguistically

deficient (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This requirement immediately positioned Imani as an

outsider, reinforcing the idea that multilingual speakers from the Global South must

provide their linguistic competence in ways that white, native English-speaking students

are never required to do (Kubota et al., 2023). The exam requirement highlights a broader

failure to recognize linguistic diversity as an asset rather than positioning it as a deficit.

After enrolling, Imani described how these barriers persisted and multiplied.

Initially, she attributed her difficulties to the nature of starting an undergraduate program

at the height of the pandemic. As restrictions eased, Imani understood that many of the

barriers she was experiencing were systemic and embedded into the institution's

approaches, policies, and practices. As an international student studying remotely, Imani

experienced how institutional policies prioritized local students, and marginalized

students whose learning trajectories did not fit dominant expectations. One of the most pressing issues was the lack of support for students studying in different time zones. Imani shared that due to a 10- to 11-hour time difference, she frequently had to study during the middle of the night. When she and other international students requested accommodations, the faculty refused:

> My first semester was very hard. The time difference was awful. I think there was a 10-hour or an 11-hour difference. And I had to do exams at 4 a.m. Some of them were at like 3 a.m. or 2 a.m., because the professors were like, 'I'm sorry. I can't make accommodations. You have to do the exam at the time they're supposed to be done.'... But they could have accommodated us, but they just didn't. (December 5, 2024)

Imani's experience with distance learning highlights the gap between universities stated commitment to global education and their actual policies and practices, which often fail to consider the diverse geographic and temporal realities of their students. Current scholarship suggests that disabled students, especially those unfamiliar with institutional norms, often have limited access to accommodations due to a lack of transparency in university policies (et al., 2012; Newman & Madaus, 2015), further illustrating the kinds of structural barriers that equity-deserving students experience on college campuses. These approaches, policies, and practices reinforced the belief that she was an outsider, failing to acknowledge and accommodate her needs.

Imani faced another systemic barrier when the online proctoring software excluded her from a high-stakes exam due to her skin color:

One time, I had an exam… and they were using proctoring software… And the exam

began, but because the software couldn't see me. Like, it couldn't identify me; it

couldn't acknowledge my skin tone. It refused to let me into the exam. It kept

saying, 'Go into a bright room,' or, 'Open the curtains,' or, 'Make sure there's

enough lighting in the room.' I was just like, 'Bro, it's daytime.' Even if it was

nighttime, I had enough lighting in the room. But, like, the software can't see my skin

tone. (December 5, 2024)

When Imani reached out to the faculty for support, her educational needs were dismissed:

I emailed the professor, and they weren't responding. So, I just lost half an hour of

the exam. Finally, I got in, but I didn't finish on time. I told the professor at the end of

the exam that I couldn't start the exam on time, that the software wouldn't let me in.

Essentially, he was like, 'I'm sorry. But I can't make any other accommodations. The

exam window has crashed.' (December 5, 2024)

Imani's story highlights how higher education often ignores the needs of racialized,

neurodivergent, and disabled students, even when they request assistance. This reflects

broader patterns of institutional neglect toward racialized disabled students (Erevelles &

Minear, 2010). Instead of promoting student success, the exam proctoring software

functioned as a policing mechanism, rendering Imani invisible. The continued failure of the

institution to take accountability extended far beyond the proctoring software, as

institutional barriers to access became a defining feature of her university experience.

Hoping that relocating to Canada would reduce some of the barriers she was

experiencing, Imani believed that physically attending the university would mitigate some

of the challenges she faced. However, once in Canada, many of the same difficulties

persisted, now compounded by the stress of being away from home. The isolation of living

in a small town, combined with the challenges of an ongoing pandemic, made it difficult

for Imani to form friendships and build a sense of community. Imani shared, "The second

year was one of the hardest years of my life … I was struggling with a lot of depression"

(December 5, 2024). As she progressed through her degree, Imani noticed educational

barriers that she hadn't previously encountered. While Imani excelled in high school,

university-level coursework proved more difficult to manage and began affecting her

overall well-being. As Imani explained,

> When I got to university, I noticed that things were more difficult, like exponentially
>
> more than high school. I wasn't struggling in high school, but then I began to
>
> struggle in university. And that's when I realized that 'Okay, so maybe my mind is
>
> just like, you know, a fun place to be.' (October 24, 2024)

The realization that she needed support marked a turning point in Imani's understanding of

how she acquired knowledge yet also exposed her to the institutional failures of university

disability services (et al., 2012; Newman & Madaus, 2015). Unlike neurotypical

students, who navigate coursework without additional intervention, neurodivergent

learners must go through a bureaucratic process to simply access university supports.

Imani shared that pursuing a formal diagnosis for what she perceived to be ADHD created

new challenges and a series of institutional barriers. Like many students, Imani described

long wait times and difficulty navigating mental health and accessibility services:

> I don't think people understand the wait times to see a psychiatrist. I sat on the
>
> waitlist to see a psychiatrist; maybe it was a six-month wait, I think. But there's
>
> people who have been waiting for [university] health services for probably like a
>
> year. (December 5, 2024)

Imani's experience is not unique. Long wait times for psychiatric assessments and

accommodations are well-known systemic failures in higher education, and such

restrictions disproportionately affect students from marginalized populations (Dwyer et

al., 2022; Evans et al., 2017). Systemic negligence was compounded by the fact that her

neurodivergence intersected with her identity as an international student. The institutional

silos between mental health services, international student services, and disability

accommodations meant that no single office was equipped to address her needs

(Dolmage, 2017). Imani was frequently redirected from one office to another, which in turn

led to months of uncertainty. During this time, Imani also consulted with multiple medical

professionals both on and off campus, who prescribed conflicting medications and

diagnoses:

> So, no one's actually giving you a specific diagnosis still. They're just like, 'Let's try
>
> this medication to see if this works. If this works, it's probably ADHD. If this doesn't
>
> work, then we'll try something else, and this would mean that it's a mood disorder.'
>
> (October 22, 2024)

This medicalized approach traps students like Imani in a relentless cycle of uncertainty,

requiring them to try psychotropic medications before receiving a definitive diagnosis.

Instead of offering care rooted in understanding, universities often treat neurodivergent

students as problems that need to be managed rather than as individuals deserving of assistance.

Imani disclosed that her accommodations were granted temporarily and that renewing them required either a formal diagnosis or a letter from a medical practitioner confirming that she was still being diagnosed. Imani described that she "had accommodations for a year. And then when the year expired, the accommodations were taken away. And I'm just like 'Y'all are crazy!' Like, the accommodations were removed because I can no longer access the system" (December 5, 2024). The university's unwillingness to give long-term accommodations demonstrates how accessibility services are used as a tool of bureaucratic control rather than student support. The academy perpetuates an ableist academic culture in which disabled students must continuously prove their legitimacy in an institution that was not created for them (Dolmage, 2017).

From Individual Barriers to Systemic Oppression

Adela and Imani's narratives illustrate two different dimensions of systemic oppression. Adela's narrative provides insight into how micro-level institutional practices including faculty biases, participation norms, and linguistic surveillance create barriers for neurodivergent EALs, demonstrating her persistence despite systemic ableism. In contrast, Imani's experiences highlight the structural nature of oppression, exposing how bureaucratic policies, institutional negligence, and racialized technological discrimination intersect to reinforce systemic barriers at a macro level. Her experiences with accommodation delays, inaccessible exam proctoring software, and inflexible institutional policies demonstrate these broader patterns of exclusion. While Adela navigated the

personal impact of these structures, Imani's experiences highlight the visible consequences of systemic exclusion when multiple forms of oppression, such as linguicism, racism, and ableism intersect.

Institutional Ableism & Linguicism

Both Adela and Imani experienced inflexible academic systems that failed to account for their neurodivergence, linguistic identities, and broader intersectional experiences as international students. Adela's experiences highlight how faculty biases and monolingual ideologies create harmful learning environments for neurodivergent EALs. Academic ableism is evident in faculty members' views that Adela's academic struggles were due to language proficiency rather than structural inaccessibility. This implies that students must adapt without institutional help (Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2011). Imani's educational experiences further highlight the connection between linguicism and ableism. Despite coming from a British colony where English is the medium of instruction, Imani had to prove her English proficiency and was forced to adhere to rigid time-zone policies that ignored the needs of international students and neurodivergent learners. These experiences reflect how ableist and linguicist expectations of language proficiency, productivity, and time management function as mechanisms of exclusion, pressuring students to conform to standardized norms rather than accommodating diverse needs.

Intersectionality and Access Barriers

The experiences of Adela and Imani demonstrate how the intersection of neurodivergence, race, EAL status, and international student identity can create multifaceted challenges that extend beyond the academic environment. Imani's journey

through medical and academic accommodation processes highlights how institutions use bureaucratic systems to gatekeep student services (Evans et al., 2017). For Adela, these kinds of barriers manifested differently but were equally harmful. Rather than confronting institutional bureaucracy directly, Adela was told she could either manage her struggles independently or drop out. Faculty members blamed Adela's language proficiency for educational barriers, instead of considering challenges in their teaching methods. These barriers forced Adela to navigate additional emotional and academic labor while pursuing her studies (Price, 2011). Imani experienced exclusion through bureaucratic procedures, while Adela faced inequity due to pedagogical methods and faculty perspectives that attributed her difficulties as personal inadequacies, rather than systemic failures.

For neurodivergent EALs, institutional resources often exist in fragmented silos, forcing students to self-advocate across disconnected institutional offices (Dolmage, 2017). The burden of navigating these structural inefficiencies rests entirely on students, placing neurodivergent EALs at a heightened disadvantage (Dolmage, 2017; Kormos & Smith, 2024; Price, 2011). The expectation that students will possess the institutional knowledge, persistence, and bandwidth to negotiate these bureaucratic structures further highlights the inequitable and oppressive nature of current institutional approaches, policies, and practices.

Conclusion: Rethinking Institutional Responsibility

Universities must critically engage with neurodivergent EALs' educational realities, as their needs remain overlooked despite their presence across all facets of the university system. To move beyond compliance-driven accessibility, universities must develop

inclusive models that recognize neurodivergent and multilingual students as an integral part of the academic community (Dolmage, 2017). Student services, such as disability resource centers, international student offices, language services, and student health services must learn to collaborate across offices, rather than operate in bureaucratic silos (Dolmage, 2017; Dwyer et al., 2022). This holistic, student-centered approach to student services is necessary, as it ensures that accessibility and support structures are embedded into the fabric of the university system.

Adela and Imani's accounts illustrate how ableism, linguicism, and racism intersect to shape undergraduate experiences. This study encourages moving beyond symbolic inclusivity to removing systemic barriers. Educational systems must serve all learners through intentional policies promoting accessibility and equity informed by students' diverse lived experiences. This would entail reevaluating pedagogical and assessment methods, expanding accommodations beyond compliance-based frameworks, and fostering an institutional culture that values diverse ways of knowing and learning. True inclusivity takes more than words. It calls for a fundamental reimagining of higher education, one that removes the systemic barriers that have historically silenced, harmed, and excluded vulnerable communities, including neurodivergent EALs.

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