Chapter

A Story of Hope: Long-Term Impacts of a Holistic Approach to English Language Support for International Students

Mira Kim, Kwanghee Han and Yongxin Lyu

Abstract

This chapter explores the long-term academic and personal development of two international engineering PhD candidates who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL): Han from South Korea and Lyu from China. Both encountered significant challenges during the early stages of their doctoral journeys in Australia. Despite their strong academic backgrounds, both struggled with confidence, communication, and cultural adjustment. Using narrative inquiry, this chapter traces their transformation through their participation in the Personalised English Language Enhancement (PELE) course. PELE is a pedagogy-driven, student-centred initiative that guides international students to take ownership of their learning journey, enhancing their English communication skills through autonomy, critical reflection, and a peer-supported community. The chapter examines how PELE supported Han and Lyu in navigating linguistic, cultural, and psychological challenges, contributing to lasting changes in their self-perception and scholarly identity. It offers a rare longitudinal perspective on a holistic approach to supporting EAL students' ability to communicate in English, illustrating how it can empower them not only to adapt and survive but to thrive as multilingual emerging scholars in academic spaces structured around English as the central medium of scholarship.

Keywords: student agency, holistic pedagogy, linguistic identity, English as an additional language (EAL), narrative inquiry

1. Introduction

Over several decades, numerous studies have documented the challenges faced by international students who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) in English-speaking countries. These challenges often include language barriers, cultural adjustment, and social isolation, all of which can significantly impact academic success and psychological well-being [1–3]. In response, many scholars have called

for more holistic approaches to supporting international students to navigate these complex transitions [4]. Addressing these issues is not only essential for fostering a positive educational experience but also for enhancing students' mental health and academic performance [5]. Few studies, however, have proposed an evidence-based holistic approach that integrates language development and well-being in a sustainable way [6].

Addressing this gap, recent research has shown that a personalised autonomous (PA) model is highly effective in supporting EAL students in higher education when applied in a course entitled Personalised English Language Enhancement (PELE). Students engaged in PELE improve not only their self-efficacy in English communication, self-directed learning, and social interaction, but also their sense of belonging and overall well-being. Notably, these improvements have been repeatedly observed across different delivery modes, time periods, and student cohorts (i.e. undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral), as evidenced in [7]. Furthermore, statistical analyses have shown that these gains are significantly greater than those who did not take the course [8, 9].

Building on the earlier studies, this chapter explores the long-term impacts of PELE through the lived experiences of two international PhD candidates. it considers how the confidence, self-efficacy, and mindset shifts developed over a 10-week term supported them in navigating the prolonged challenges of doctoral study and flourishing both academically and personally. It also explores the personal characteristics or dispositions that helped sustain these benefits over time. Having encountered PELE in their first year and continued to engage with it throughout their candidature, their stories illustrate how language support—when grounded in holistic, humanistic, and community-based principles—can become a catalyst for healing, growth, and empowerment.

This chapter draws on first-person narratives written by the second and third authors, developed from personal journals kept over several years. While not intended to produce generalisable findings, this account aims to illuminate how deeply personal, contextually situated experiences can inform broader understandings of international doctoral education as a complex and identity-shaping process. To convey these insights, the chapter first outlines the research context and methodology and then presents the two narratives in full. These are followed by an analysis that identifies key factors sustaining long-term transformation, before concluding with reflections on the broader implications of adopting a holistic, humanistic model to support international students in higher education.

2. Research context

The immediate context of this study is situated in the Personalised English Language Enhancement (PELE) course at the authors' university in Australia. PELE was developed in response to the persistent challenges faced by international EAL students in English-speaking higher education contexts. While many institutions have implemented remedial models—such as one-to-one consultations, generic workshops, or embedded literacy support—these approaches have often had limited impacts due to low engagement, lack of sustainability, and a deficit-oriented framing of students' language needs, as acknowledged in [10]. At the authors' university, PELE is offered alongside all the traditional forms of support as a credit-bearing course, designed to provide a fundamentally different approach: one that is holistic,

student-centred, and grounded in autonomy, reflection, and community. This section outlines its core pedagogy and unique features to help contextualise the two narratives presented in this chapter. A more detailed account can be found in the earlier PELE studies referenced above.

2.1 PA model

At the heart of PELE is the personalised autonomous (PA) model, which promotes a cyclical and exploratory approach to learning. Students are guided through five stages: awareness, analysis, planning, implementation, and reflection. Within this framework, they identify a specific area of English they wish to improve, design a personal project aligned with their goals, implement it in real-life contexts, and reflect on their progress through journaling, peer sharing, presentations, and essays. This pedagogy is deeply informed by sociocultural theories of learning, which conceptualise learning as a socially embedded and emotionally mediated process (see [7] for theoretical foundations and PELE assessments). The PA model recognises that confidence, motivation, identity, and interpersonal relationships are as critical to language development as grammar or vocabulary. Therefore, it is crucial in any program where the PA model is applied to create a safe, non-judgemental learning environment where students are treated not as passive recipients of instruction but as empowered partners in their own learning.

2.2 Personalised English language enhancement

As briefly noted earlier, PELE differs fundamentally from conventional academic English support, both its design and ethos. Rather than delivering pre-determined skills such as academic writing or presentation techniques, the course begins with a process of guided inquiry. Students are invited to reflect on questions such as:

- In what specific context would you like to communicate more effectively?
- What do you believe holds you back from being a confident communicator in that context?

These prompts are not rhetorical; they are intended to help students articulate their own priorities and uncover the personal, linguistic, or psychological barriers that shape their communication.

Through this reflective process, abstract aspirations—such as "I want to be more confident" or "I want to connect better with my peers"—are transformed into concrete, manageable personal projects. Drawing from a range of methods and resources introduced in class, students choose the strategies most relevant to their goals. Each project includes a clear plan for implementation in real-life contexts and a self-selected method for evaluating progress, typically over a focused period of 4–5 weeks.

This approach positions students not as passive recipients of instruction but as active designers of their own learning, with the course providing a structured yet flexible framework for experimentation, reflection, and measurable growth.

Apart from their personal projects, students participate in a learning environment that is student-centred, emotionally attuned, and socially connected. The key components of the PELE learning include:

- *Reflective practice*: Journaling, peer sharing, and guided reflection are central tools for developing metacognitive awareness, fostering a growth mindset, and making sense of one's progress.

- *Focus on communication skills rather than language skills*: The ultimate purpose of language learning is to communicate effectively and effortlessly. In this sense, it is easy to see that language learning is a lifelong journey even in one's mother tongue. PELE therefore introduces critical communication strategies such as non-violent communication [11] to help students interact with clarity, compassion, and healthy boundaries.

- *PELE working principles*: Aligned with its focus on communication over language form, PELE is grounded in five working principles that guide students through challenges: *work smarter, not harder*—build efficient habits and use resources wisely; *make plans but remain flexible*—adapt plans with resilience; *communicate honestly and respectfully*—foster trust through clarity and compassion; *have a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset*—treat challenges as opportunities; and *have fun*—keep joy and motivation alive. Combined with PELE's mentorship culture, these principles create a supportive, student-centred environment where learning is both effective and transformative [12].

- *Mentorship and community*: Students have opportunities to become peer mentors, further reinforcing their sense of agency, belonging, and leadership. Former students (mentors) support new cohorts, creating an intergenerational learning culture grounded in trust, encouragement, and mutual care.

- *Social learning spaces*: In addition to formal classes, PELE offers student-led social clubs (e.g. mindfulness club, ukulele club, singing club, and board game club) where language practice is embedded in meaningful interaction.

- *Safe space for vulnerability and experimentation*: Perhaps most importantly, PELE positions itself as a space where students can express themselves authentically without fear of judgement, explore unfamiliar ways of speaking and writing, and celebrate progress—however small.

This approach has proven highly effective in fostering student engagement—a key factor that not only enhances language development but also strengthens critical thinking, emotional resilience, and lifelong learning habits, as demonstrated in the studies cited above.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research approach

This study adopts a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach to explore how the PELE course, underpinned by the PA model, has supported the two international PhD candidates in navigating the academic, emotional, and cultural complexities of doctoral study. Narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited to this investigation, as it enables a deep engagement with the lived experiences of individuals and recognises the role of context, identity, and emotion in shaping meaning [13].

3.2 Participant background

Han and Lyu are international PhD candidates in engineering who began their doctoral studies in 2022 and 2021, respectively. Both learned English as a foreign language in school in their home countries. Han, a South Korean candidate in his early 40s, returned to academia after a career break, relocating with his family and taking on the responsibilities of being a primary breadwinner. Balancing academic demands with family obligations introduced additional emotional and psychological challenges. Lyu, a Chinese candidate in her late 20s, completed her bachelor's and master's degrees in Hong Kong but encountered unexpected difficulties adapting to the academic norms, communication styles, and learning culture in Australia. Both candidates engaged with the PELE course in their first year of candidature and continued to apply its principles throughout their doctoral journey.

3.3 Narrative sources

At the time of writing this chapter, Han was in the final stages of completing his thesis, and Lyu had recently submitted hers. Both welcomed the opportunity to co-author this chapter, as they saw PELE as inseparable from their PhD journeys but found no space to write about it in their engineering theses. Their narratives were written retrospectively, drawing on their personal journals. These journals were initially created as part of their engagement with the PELE course and were retained after the course ended, later being shaped into first-person narratives. They capture the candidates' evolving experiences with language, identity, academic life, and personal growth—both within and beyond the PELE context.

3.4 Data analysis

Kim, the first co-author, created the PELE course in 2016 and has convened it since then. She has had the privilege of closely observing both candidates throughout their journeys—not only as a researcher, but also as a PELE lecturer, mentor, and friend. This multiple role enabled a unique form of embedded observation, where analysis is informed by both qualitative inquiry and relational experience.

The analysis process unfolded in several stages. First, Kim manually coded each narrative through multiple close readings, identifying recurring patterns and themes within and across the two accounts. This inductive process highlighted both shared struggles and unique trajectories. Second, to enhance reflexivity and reduce potential bias given her dual role as course creator and researcher, Kim compared her manual coding with a thematic analysis generated by ChatGPT, using the latter as a counterpoint to check the consistency and comprehensiveness of her own interpretation. Third, the preliminary themes were shared with Han and Lyu, who reviewed them to ensure their experiences were fairly represented through Kim's lens. Following their feedback and minor adjustments, the three authors reached consensus on three overarching themes: *Pains and Struggles*, *PELE factors*, and *Co-creating Transformation*. These themes form the structure of the discussion section, where they are examined in depth alongside relevant literature and Kim's own reflections and observations.

Throughout this process, Kim's positionality as both insider and researcher was explicitly acknowledged. While her role afforded unique contextual insights, it also carried the risk of interpretive bias. To mitigate this, she adopted a reflexive stance—triangulating her interpretations with AI-assisted thematic analysis, inviting

participant validation, and engaging in collaborative discussion with her co-authors. These steps were taken to balance the depth of insider knowledge with the rigour, transparency, and fairness expected in qualitative research.

3.5 Ethical considerations and epistemological position

Importantly, no external participants were involved in this study, and no data were collected through interviews or surveys. Han and Lyu's narratives are their own, and their dual roles as co-authors and reflective storytellers ensure that agency remains firmly with them. This mode of inquiry aligns with the principles of collaborative autoethnography where researchers draw on personal experience not only to understand themselves but also to illuminate broader educational, cultural, and institutional phenomena [14].

By foregrounding lived experience, this chapter challenges traditional dichotomies between researcher and participant, teacher and student, data, and story. It affirms that international doctoral candidates are not merely subjects of research or recipients of support—they are meaning-makers, scholars, and storytellers in their own right.

4. Han's narrative: Fear to love

4.1 Outline for the story of my Ph.D. journey

This is my genuine story about how challenging my PhD journey in Australia has been, as an international student, a breadwinner, and someone who returned to academia in his early 40s after a long time in industry, and how I overcame these challenges with the help of my lovely course and also community, PELE. I would like to share with others not only what I have learned from it, but also what I have been able to give back. My story unfolds chronologically from my mid-teens to the present, demonstrating how my attitude towards English has changed through PELE.

4.2 Lingering burden: From adolescence to industry (mid-teens to late 30s)

I started learning English in middle school, like most students of my age in South Korea. Korean speakers tend to articulate nearly every syllable, whereas English mainly emphasise content words, often weakening function words. The way English native speakers roll their tongues to pronounce the "r" sound seemed strange to me, since Korean does not have that sound. Despite studying English for about 30 years and even getting excellent scores in exams, I did not understand why I still could not speak it confidently. Looking back, I think it might start with a kind of trauma I experienced in middle school. Once, when I had a chance to read an English textbook aloud in class, my pronunciation, with a strong Korean accent, made my classmates laugh at me as if it were a comedy show. That moment created a negative connection between me and English, which stayed with me for a long time.

Even though English was not my favourite subject, I could still get high scores easily. Thanks to those scores, I was fortunate to enter one of the top universities in South Korea, Yonsei University. However, I knew I could not really speak English, and I avoided situations where I had to use it. I did not want others to think I was foolish because of my lack of fluency. The situation continued at my company. One day my boss asked me to take a phone call from a foreigner just because I had gone to a good

university. He probably assumed I could speak English fluently—but I could not. I hated how I sounded in English. Every time I opened my mouth, I was afraid people were judging me. I usually avoided situations where I had to speak English in front of others, even though I continued studying it secretly on my own. Because of the trauma I experienced in my youth and my foolish desire to appear smart just because I went to a good university, I was afraid of English for a long time even as I admired fluent English speakers and longed to be one of them. Now that I look back, I realise I should have let go of my perfectionism when speaking English. After all, it is my second language, and the perfection I desired is not necessary.

4.3 Fear and turmoil: Pre-departure anxiety and early struggles in Australia (late 30s)

Even though I still could not speak English well, I had the skills to score highly on tests. That allowed me to seize the opportunity to study abroad and pursue a PhD program. Honestly, I did not expect to get this chance so soon, and I wasn't fully committed to the idea of studying overseas in an English-speaking environment, especially since I wasn't sure if I could succeed in academia after such a long break. At the same time, I wanted to go and patiently waited for my Confirmation of Enrolment (CoE) to arrive. However, it took almost half a year, even though the Website said it would take only 8 weeks. I was getting nervous as time was running out to get a visa. However, I should have understood that this delay was due to cultural differences. Things do not always run on time here, unlike in Korea where people usually respond immediately. I could have called the university to ask about my application, but I did not have the courage to do so because I lacked confidence in my English. Day by day, my excitement for studying abroad shrank, while my anxiety about studying in an unfamiliar environment grew bigger and bigger.

Even after arriving in Sydney, filled with nervousness, I continued to struggle to settle. I experienced insurance fraud, failed to enrol my daughter in school, and struggled to find suitable housing for my family. I blamed myself for not fulfilling my responsibilities as the head of the household. I had no choice but to drink every night and even developed an "English Phobia." I did not want to use a single English word, not even for a whole day. Naturally, I could not focus on my research. For weekly meetings with my supervisor, I had to prepare a script and memorise it word for word spending an excessive amount of time due to my lack of confidence in English. However, this approach made me inflexible, and I could not respond to supervisor's comments. Consequently, the lingering memory of failure, dating back to middle school, continued to torment me. When it came to using English for settling in, I found myself in a vicious cycle of anxiety, failure, and fear.

4.4 Turning point: Embracing PELE and a shift in mindset (age 40)

While I was trapped in a cycle of self-blame, I was fortunate to encounter and join PELE. It offers five working principles, and one in particular has guided not only my Ph.D. journey but also my life as a whole. Moreover, PELE provides a loving community where we share our struggles without judgement and celebrate our joys together. Even after completing the course, I have continued to improve my English by staying in the community as a mentor. Through this experience, I have been able to expand my comfort zone, break down the wall of fear, and heal the painful memories of past failures. I came to realise every effort counts and it's "OK" to make mistakes. The

mindset shift helped me not just in speaking English, but in thinking more flexibly and handling pressure with greater ease.

4.4.1 The PELE principle

My mindset began to change based on one of the principles in PELE, which is "Have a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset". This made me realise that we need to keep learning throughout our lives, even into our 50s, 60s, or 70s. Also, I came to understand that communicating in English is not a sign of intelligence, but a skill to be acquired. Therefore, it does not matter how smart you are and acquiring something takes a lot of time as it is not natural for us to take in a ton of information at once. My former, unrealistic desire to master English *quickly* led me to give up whenever I failed. Realising English learning is as long-time journey freed me from the heavy burden of trying to become fluent overnight.

4.4.2 Community

International students, who leave their home countries for different surroundings, can be easily isolated even though they are accompanied by their family members. Everything is new, tasks, friends, co-workers, and culture, and every experience feels like a first. They want to have a secret sanctuary, their home, so they do not have to go outside and feel overwhelmed by unfamiliar things. From my experience, I know how easily the mind can be drowned out by the noise of anxiety, grief, and regret. This inner turbulence makes it hard to find peace and, as a consequence, hard to pursue their studies or care for their family.

When I felt this way, PELE helped me overcome those moods through its well-established community where everyone listens, understands, and empathises deeply. PELE also helped me to find my people and soulmates who cherish and uplift me without ulterior motives. Moreover, no one told me to fix my accent. Instead, they simply said, "It's okay." That broke something open in me. For the first time, I was no longer afraid to be myself in English. This acceptance supported my mental health by reducing nervousness and anxiety. PELE also offered a range of social clubs, which gave me many opportunities to practice without feeling overwhelmed.

4.4.3 Special opportunity being a mentor to improve my skills

After the PELE course, PELErs can remain in this loving community as mentors. It is a great opportunity to share our reflections, kindness, and care with others just. We can learn how to get along with others through acts of giving, going beyond just learning English or overcoming language and cultural barriers. In other words, learning English becomes a bonus from that point on. I became someone I never imagined—someone others looked to for help. That gave me more confidence than mastering any grammar rule ever could.

In our engineering faculty, we have a compulsory course that all first-year PhD students must take to learn essential research skills and knowledge applicable across disciplines. In the course, 1 h is allocated to introducing PELE. I have had the privilege of sharing my experience of living overseas and participating in PELE with more than 100 students. I've done it five times. At first, I was afraid of the big room and the large audience. The last time I spoke, I was still a bit nervous, but it was a different kind of nervousness. It gave me energy. I'm now able to communicate not only with

individuals but also with a large audience, sharing laughter and empathy. Without a doubt, the skills I gained through these opportunities have strengthened my confidence in research presentations, even at major conferences.

4.4.4 It's OK to expand your comfort zone

PELE's slogan is "It's OK!". This amazingly minimises the chances of hurting or humiliating others. It is completely natural you all are not to speak fluent in English as a second, third, or fourth language. Therefore, if communication breaks down, it is not only your fault but the person you are speaking with also shares responsibility since communication is a two-way process. We are told in PELE, "Do not push yourself too hard to be perfect. Do not be afraid of speaking to others, even if listeners do not fully understand. Just keep practicing and challenging yourself." I believe that to expand our comfort zone requires the hard work of confronting yourself and demolishing the walls built by fear. At the same time, you should treat yourself with kindness, forgiving your missteps, which I could not do before. I realised that draining energy through worry never improves outcomes. Daily discipline, practice, reflection, and occasional challenges without worrying could help to expand your comfort zone and improve your learning skill. Remember: "It's OK," So do not worry.

4.5 From fear to love: Growth and reflection (age 42)

I now maintain a daily routine that includes morning yoga, meditation, and Bible reading. Staying disciplined in these practices has given me deeper self-awareness. It helps me remain calm even amid chaos and relieve anxiety about the future and regrets about the past. Another habit I've embraced is journaling with reflection, writing down things I'm grateful for each day. At first, I did not quite understand what it meant. But over time, I discovered how focusing on gratitude can shift my perspective. While life inevitably comes with highs and lows such as joy and sorrow, anger and delight, being able to find gratitude in the midst of it all has become the compass I choose to follow as a lifelong learner. While serving as PELE mentor, I've learned that the role of a mentor is not simply to help but also to learn from our mentees. One day, one of my mentees shared a quote from a book she had read, and it has stayed with me ever since as a reminder to never forget gratitude: "Even if you're the one driving your own life, fear may still come along for the ride. It might shrink your confidence, but you don't have to give it permission to navigate or even pick the music you love."

Regarding my research as a PhD student, I no longer prepare scripts for meetings. Now, I am able to confidently convey my research idea in English to my supervisors and colleagues, even to a general audience at large conferences. A few months ago, I attended a major conference called European Geosciences Union in Austria. Although it was my first time attending such a big conference, I felt comfortable somehow. I recognised diverse European accents. The general atmosphere of trying to understand English as everyone's second language was similar to PELE, which boosted my confidence. Although I enjoyed everything, I felt overwhelmed when I realised I was scheduled to present in the largest room of the conference. Just as my mind started to fill with doubt about whether I could do it well, I recalled my presentations at the first-year engineering course where I spoke to more than 100 PhD students. Yes, I had already several times speaking English before a large audience! My presentation went well, and I even received emails from panel members interested in my research.

If I were to draw a line through my life before and after PELE, I would dare to define it a shift from 'Fear' and 'Love'. Before PELE, fear subtly steered my actions towards hesitation and an unwillingness to release grudges against myself. PELE represents love to me as it taught me how to communicate with myself and others with courage and kindness. If you ask me about my English ability at this moment, I would honestly say I am still struggling. Yet "it's OK". I know I am on a joyful journey of growth through PELE where all PELErs are having a ball.

5. Lyu's narrative: Finding my voice

I'm writing this reflection just a few days after receiving my PhD completion letter. The degree itself means a lot, but what I'm most proud of is something deeper: the person I've grown into, and the confidence I've gained—something I will carry with me long after graduation. When I look at the pages of my thesis, I see equations, figures, and results. But behind those technical details lies something just as important: the personal journey of adapting to a new academic environment, facing the pressures of PhD life, and slowly finding my scholarly voice.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have discovered a supportive community early in my PhD—Personalised English Language Enhancement (PELE). PELE gave me a space to reflect, connect, and grow, and I now see it as one of the greatest gifts of my PhD. Coming from a science background, I often want to measure progress with data, but no graph that can capture what this community has given me. Its impact cannot be quantified—but it is deeply felt.

5.1 Back to the beginning

When I first received my Australian student visa in 2021, I felt a rush of excitement. Starting a PhD at UNSW felt like the beginning of something big. I had already lived away from home for several years—I had moved more than a thousand miles on my own from my hometown in mainland China to pursue both my undergrad and master's degree in Hong Kong. I was used to navigating new environments, new languages, and even different education systems. So, I assumed I would adapt to life in Australia just as smoothly.

Because of COVID-19, my first two terms were entirely online. I attended welcome seminars, joined Teams meetings, and presented my research updates through slides. Structurally, everything was in place. But I soon realised how much I struggled in more casual academic conversations. It wasn't about grammar—it was about catching the flow, picking up subtle nuances, and knowing when to join in. I began to speak less, not for lack of ideas, but because I could not yet express them naturally in English.

5.2 Discovering PELE

Two months into my PhD, I received an email about the PELE course. It said that it had helped many international students, so I signed up with my supervisor's encouragement. At that time, I expected a typical academic English course: grammar drills, pronunciation exercises, maybe some writing practice. Instead, I found something entirely different.

Even through a Zoom screen, PELE felt warm and welcoming. The lecturer and tutor called us by our names. Our tutorial discussions were facilitated by peer mentors, who completed PELE before us and felt like friends. The atmosphere was open, supportive, and unexpectedly personal. We were not treated like language learners, but as whole people—researchers, thinkers, individuals navigating complex transitions. We set our own learning goals, designed our own personal projects, and were even invited to join a variety of social clubs. For the first time, I felt like I belonged in a space where I did not have to prove anything. I could just simply try, experiment with my words, even make mistakes and that was okay.

For my personal project, I tackled a challenge that had bothered me since day one: joining casual discussions in group meetings. I wasn't sure exactly what was missing in my speaking, but I assumed it must be that I did not sound like a native speaker. So, I began imitating TED Talks—measuring my intonation, practising English rhythm, and trying to make everything sound "perfect". But the result did not sound like me.

Then, during a PELE lecture, something clicked. A line stayed with me: "English is a tool for communication. If people can understand you, you're doing just fine." I realised my accent was part of my identity, and I do not need to erase it. That mindset shift changed everything. I stopped thinking I had to be perfect and focused on expressing myself authentically. Within just a month, my confidence grew. I noticed improvements in my group meetings—and so did my group mates. I became more relaxed, more engaged, and more present. I remember writing in my journal: "I can't believe it! I see real improvement in just one month." I called it the PELE magic.

This experience uncovered something deeper. Having studied science-focused subjects since high school, I had always seen language as my weakest skill. Even in Chinese, my native language, I often struggled to find the right words. I saw myself as a science nerd—logical, technical, and definitely not gifted for language.

PELE changed that perspective. I learned that language is simply a tool for communication, and communication is a skill that can be developed and nurtured. It's not about using fancy words or sounding like someone else, but making genuine connections. That's where my PELE journey began. And as I would soon discover, it had much more to offer than I ever expected.

5.3 Culture and belonging

Right after finishing PELE online, I finally arrived in Sydney. It felt like stepping into a postcard. The city was full of little joys—pastries and coffee in the air, the brightness of jacaranda trees, and the sound of local accents drifting through the neighbourhood. I met my PELE friends in person for the first time, and we laughed about how different we looked from our Zoom screens. Everyone said, "You're taller than I expected!"

Those first few months were full of wonder. I wandered around campus, discovered cozy cafés, went on weekend hikes, and slowly built a life in Sydney. PELE remained my anchor, not just for language practice, but as a space to meet like-minded people.

But once the novelty wore off, something quieter crept in—discomfort. In-person interactions were harder than I imagined. I could follow lectures and research meetings, but social conversations often stayed on the surface: "What are you studying?" "Where are you from?" I longed for deeper connections, but I did not know how to initiate them—not in English, not in this cultural context.

Living in a culturally diverse country taught me that communication is more than fluency—it's deeply cultural. In my home country, small talk is not how relationships begin; we build connections through shared tasks and a clear purpose. But in Australia, I came to realise that chatting about the weather or weekend plans is often the first step towards trust. It took time—and many awkward silences—for me to see small talk as a form of social glue.

PELE gave me early exposure to people from all kinds of backgrounds, and that experience helped me become more open and confident. As someone who's naturally shy, I've found that my "English personality" is more outgoing than my "Chinese personality"—a surprise that has shaped my life in Sydney. I've been lucky to meet warm, supportive people who made Sydney feel like home.

This shift has changed how I approach even in academic settings in engineering and science, where I've learned that building rapport matters as much as research. And for me, that lesson started in a PELE classroom—where we shared not only our struggles with English, but also our reflections on identity, belonging, and change.

5.4 Growth under pressure

The pressure of academia crept in before I was ready. My first-year research progress review nearly broke me—my research direction was unclear, and I had little to show beyond a literature review. The panel expressed concern, and I remember breaking down in tears as soon as the meeting ended. That moment became a snapshot of many similar, emotionally draining experiences throughout my PhD: critical feedback, failed simulations, struggling to write up my ideas clearly, and the overwhelming comparison with more confident peers.

My response to these moments followed a familiar pattern. I would begin doubting myself: Am I good enough? Do I belong here? In the effort to prove my worth, I leaned into the image of the "hardworking" researcher I thought I needed to be. I worked long hours, ran simulations non-stop, and let weekends blur into weekdays. I even questioned whether I could spare time to be a PELE mentor or to simply join a social club. Would it really help me as a science and engineering student?

The answer did not come until I burned out—more than once. My focus slipped away, progress stalled, and I would often sit for hours staring blankly at research papers. In those quiet moments of exhaustion, I realised how much I missed PELE: the heart-warming reflections, the honest check-ins, and the laughter in social clubs. Even then, I doubted my own emotions. Am I just being dramatic? Should I just toughen up and push through? It took time to accept that needing something like PELE wasn't a weakness.

One of PELE's core messages is, "It's okay." As someone emotionally sensitive, this made me feel seen. Vulnerability wasn't hidden; it was explored and shared. And I wasn't alone—many others felt the same way. We supported one another through the ups and downs, creating a space to share not just academic goals, but human struggles. I felt held, even when I doubted myself, the community kept me going.

Over time, I've also come to believe there's a second part to that message: "It's okay—and you can do it." PELE helped me stretch beyond my comfort zone. It gave me safe, structured opportunities to practice being brave. I remember inviting feedback on my first personal project, mentoring for the first time while feeling nervous, speaking in front of a large lecture room full of engineering students, and even hosting a social club. Each of these moments carried fear, but also a gentle push from someone who believed in me. And each time, I walked away stronger.

One of my favourite memories was winter ocean swim sessions with Mira and other PELE friends. We were hesitant, unsure if we could jump into the freezing cold water. But we did! And we felt refreshed, proud, and connected. That swim, like so many PELE experiences, became a mental anchor for me—something I always return to whenever I face a daunting challenge. I did not always feel strong in those moments, but I remembered what I'd learned in PELE—how to pause, breathe, and try again.

Eventually, I realised I was never lacking time—I was lacking energy. And PELE gave me that energy: to keep going when things got hard, to embrace my sensitivity instead of hiding it, and to say, I can do this—in my own way, and on my own terms.

5.5 Becoming a communicator

Among the many personal potentials PELE encouraged me to explore, communication was the most transformative. Building on the momentum of my first personal project, I sought every opportunity to practice: leading group discussions in tutorials, sharing my PELE experience with new PhD students in a large lecture theatre, and hosting social clubs.

One of the earliest lessons came when I tried to explain my research to PELE friends outside my school, many of whom were from the social sciences. They were genuinely curious but clearly puzzled when I mentioned terms like perovskites, quantum wells, or machine learning models. I realised I was relying on jargon, assuming shared knowledge. I practiced what I had learned from PELE: I gave myself the space to slow down, reflect, and try again—using simpler words. I began to truly live the quote: "If you can't explain your science simply, you don't understand it well enough." Communicating complex ideas simply takes empathy, humility, and a lot of practice. Gradually, I began to see people's eyes light up with understanding. I started to believe in my ability to connect—and in doing so, I gained a deeper understanding of my own research.

One key milestone in this journey was my second-year research progress review. I was still nervous, haunted by the memory of my first-year review, but this time, the panel was satisfied with my research progress after a year of collecting data and results. To my surprise, they praised the clarity of my presentation and even asked to use my slides as a model. I was stunned.

As I was building confidence in public and cross-disciplinary communication, I began to realise that research communication extends far beyond presentations. The harder challenge lay in navigating the non-technical aspects of academia, especially my relationship with my supervisor. Feedback on my work often left me defensive. I shut down, avoid follow-ups, and spend more time mentally preparing for the meetings than acting on suggestions. Once again, PELE provided the shift I needed. Through concepts like non-violent communication and crucial conversations, I began seeing my supervisor not just as an authority, but as a person with their own pressures and a genuine intention to help. Asking clarifying questions and seeking specific feedback turned misunderstandings into learning opportunities.

My new growth in communication was tested again when I joined the UNSW STEMM champions program, which brings together early-career female researchers passionate about science communications. Most participants were native English speakers, and I sometimes felt my English lacked polish to carry the same weight as their voices.

Over time, I realised that my communication style is simply different—and that's okay. I may not use fancy words, but I can make complex topics easy to understand. Several peers even told me that my talks were among the clearest. What I once thought was a weakness, I now recognise as a strength. And I know this shift did not happen by accident. It came from PELE—from the belief that I could grow as a communicator in my own style, and from the practice of meeting, connecting with, and learning from people of all backgrounds.

In the final year of my PhD, I began seeing the full impact of this transformation. I launched my own blog to share reflections and insights from my research journey in English. I signed up to present at Pint of Science—a public science communication event I once only dreamed of attending. These moments were not just milestones; they were affirmations that I had truly grown into a communicator—one who could share ideas, connect across disciplines, and tell stories that resonate.

5.6 Quiet leadership and giving back

Finding my voice through PELE naturally led to the next step—learning how to use it to support others. For me, that meant growing into leadership, something I'm still exploring.

I've always seen myself as a quiet person—more of a listener than a talker. In group settings, I rarely spoke first. I preferred to think carefully before contributing, and I often worried that my words would not come out quite right. In science and engineering, I've noticed that the people who speak the loudest or with the most self-assurance are often taken as a sign of expertise, regardless of whether the ideas are correct. I found myself wondering: Do I have a leadership style? Am I too quiet to lead?

I explored different communities on campus—like the STEMM champions program—and met many inspiring people. But it was in PELE that leadership began to feel truly accessible. I saw role models like Mira lead with compassion, presence, and calm strength. Looking back, I now realise that the seeds of leadership were already being planted in those early PELE tutorials.

Through the mentoring opportunities, I wasn't just encouraged to speak—I was invited to help others speak too. I began by supporting small group discussions, offering encouragement to newer students who were hesitant, just as I had once been. Stepping into mentoring felt unfamiliar at first, but the more I contributed, the stronger and more confident my voice became.

This term, I began teaching as a tutor for the first time. At first, I doubted whether I could explain things clearly or earn my students' trust. But when I saw students making progress, when I noticed their trust reflected back to me—I started to believe in myself. And I thought: Maybe I do have a kind of leadership after all.

I'm still in the process of developing what leadership means to me. But one thing I've learned is that leadership does not have to be loud or forceful. It can be quiet, relational, and consistent. It can mean making others feel seen. It can mean holding space for someone to find their own voice. That's the kind of leadership I've come to practice—not one of authority, but one of trust. And it's the kind of leadership I first experienced in PELE.

That same spirit of giving back has shaped other parts of my academic life. In my final year, I joined my school's student society as a peer mentoring coordinator. I wanted to support students because I remembered exactly what it felt like to be in their shoes—nervous, uncertain, and searching for connection. What amazes me now is how deeply the PELE mindset continues to guide me—bringing warmth,

encouragement, and empathy into everything I do. The kindness I once received now fuels my desire to pass it on. I've found that when I lead with that same spirit, I attract like-minded people—people who gently challenge me to step out of my comfort zone, uplift me, and help me grow.

5.7 The lasting impact

The impact of PELE on me has been slow and nourishing. It did not erase my accent or make academic writing effortless, but its effects often return when I least expect them—quiet reminders that something has changed. I still stumble at times, especially in fast conversations with native speakers or when writing under pressure. But I no longer see that as a flaw. I see it as part of being a multilingual communicator—someone who can navigate across cultures, adapt, and connect.

The future is still unfolding. But now, I face it with curiosity and confidence—grateful for the people and experiences that helped me find my voice.

6. Discussion: Reflections from the PELE creator

Writing this chapter alongside Han and Lyu has been a profoundly moving experience. While I have known both of them for years through their engagement with PELE, revisiting their stories in narrative form has given me new insights—not just into their growth, but into the deeper forces that shape international doctoral experiences. Their courage in naming past pain, embracing vulnerability, and reflecting so openly compels me to pause and consider the interplay between personal struggle, educational systems, and the possibilities of a more humanised pedagogy.

6.1 Pains and struggles: Internalised pressure and systemic gaps

Both Han and Lyu's stories involve significant emotional strain and ongoing struggle although their experiences emerged in distinct ways.

6.1.1 Han: The hidden burden of accent anxiety

Han's experience was shaped by a long-standing and deeply internalised sense of linguistic inadequacy. From adolescence, he felt shame about his English pronunciation, which was substantially influenced by his Korean accent. The internal fear led to chronic avoidance of English-speaking opportunities, despite his strong academic record. After relocating to Sydney, the tension between his intellectual competence and linguistic insecurity became unbearable, particularly in high-stakes, everyday contexts like enrolling his daughter in school. Han's emotional distress manifested in self-isolation, compulsive over-preparation, and even coping through alcohol, which are behaviours consistent with patterns of language-related anxiety and avoidance described in second language acquisition research [15].

6.1.2 Lyu: The gradual accumulation of self-doubt

Lyu's journey, in contrast, was not rooted in trauma but in the slow build-up of self-awareness and comparison. Despite her academic success in Hong Kong, she found herself struggling with subtler aspects of communication in Australia. These

realisations created self-doubt and identity conflict, especially when she began comparing herself to native speakers. Like Han, Lyu's behaviour became increasingly cautious—hesitating to speak up, and questioning her competence despite clear accomplishments. These patterns reflect the self-silencing strategies frequently observed among international students facing high performance expectations and internalised linguistic insecurity.

6.1.3 Pain as a product of structural and ideological forces

Crucially, these emotional burdens were not random or purely individual. They were shaped by broader structural and ideological forces. Both Han and Lyu's discomforts stemmed from traditional English language education systems that prioritise standardised testing and valorise native-like fluency. These systems are influenced by the colonial legacies of English as a gatekeeper to power and legitimacy. Global English language education has historically operated under Anglocentric norms that marginalise non-native speakers. This colonial logic positions native speakers—often white, Western, and monolingual—as the standard, while others must conform, erase, or remain silent [16].

At the same time, their struggles can be understood through Norton's concept of *investment*, which frames language learning not merely as an outcome of motivation but as a socially situated act tied to identity and access to resources [17]. For Han and Lyu, investing in English meant negotiating unequal power relations in order to claim legitimacy and belonging in academic spaces. Their pains thus reflected not only linguistic challenges but also the broader struggle to be recognised as competent, valued participants in a system that privileges certain identities while marginalising others.

Both Han and Lyu's struggles also echo system flaws rooted in twentieth-century educational models. Modern schooling is shaped by a reductionist worldview—treating learning as a measurable product rather than a dynamic, evolving process [18]. It promotes competition and fear of failure, shaping students through compliance rather than curiosity. Within this framework, Han and Lyu were not merely acquiring a language; they were navigating a deeply ideological space in which language signified social value and cultural legitimacy. Their pain stemmed from how their multilingual and culturally rich identities were overlooked or devalued in academic environments that subtly privilege conformity over diversity.

6.2 PELE factors: Humanistic culture

The transformative shift in both Han and Lyu's experiences began not with technical language instruction, but with a redefinition of what it meant to learn, use, and grow through English. Their stories have revealed that PELE's strength lay not only in its personalised autonomous (PA) model—which encouraged self-directed personal projects and reflective practice—but in the humanistic culture that surrounded it.

6.2.1 A space where "It's okay"

One of the most powerful interventions, as Han repeatedly noted, was the idea that "it's okay"—to have an accent, to not be perfect, to be vulnerable. This message—simple but radical in context—helped reframe English not as a gatekeeper, but as a relational and evolving practice. For Han, it meant releasing years of internalised

shame and fear. For Lyu, it allowed her to engage authentically, even in moments of uncertainty.

6.2.2 Community as emotional infrastructure

The PA model promotes self-directed learning, developing sustainable habits and reflection, which enhance students' confidence, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging significantly over one term as reported in earlier PELE studies. However, what seems to have sustained students' growth is the relational environment that PELE fostered. Weekly discussions, peer mentoring, and narrative sharing cultivated a sense of community-based accountability and care**.** This sense of belonging allowed students to step carefully outside their comfort zones into what Vygotsky might call a zone of proximal development—a learning space scaffolded by social support and emotional safety [19].

6.2.3 Beyond the model: Humanising pedagogy

PELE's success is not reducible to its structural design; its impact stems from how the model is enacted—relationally, flexibly, and compassionately. As the course convener, I observed that what mattered most was not just the "what" of the PA process, but the "how" of its delivery. PELE teachers, including myself, model vulnerability, normalise fear, and create rituals of sharing that honour each learner's journey [12]. The result is a pedagogy of presence—a form of language education that recognises students not merely as learners but as whole people navigating layered personal, academic, and cultural identities.

6.3 Co-creating transformation: Lyu and Han's engagement with PELE

While PELE provided the framework, resources, and community for growth, the depth of transformation experienced by Lyu and Han cannot be attributed to the course alone. Their journeys demonstrate that change emerges through a dynamic interplay between external opportunities and personal agency. Both candidates engaged with PELE not as passive recipients of support, but as active participants—reflecting deeply, taking risks, and contributing back to the community. In doing so, they transformed PELE from a course into a lived practice, amplifying its impact on their academic progress, personal well-being, and sense of belonging.

Among the many insights from Han and Lyu's narratives, what stands out most is their shared longing for growth and their deep desire to give back. These qualities, in turn, enrich the very community that supported them. This underscores an essential yet often overlooked truth in English language education: international students are not passive recipients of instruction, but active meaning-makers who can flourish through contribution when provided with a supportive and enabling environment.

6.3.1 Longing for growth

For both Han and Lyu, joining PELE was an intentional choice shaped by an underlying drive to grow, even if they could not fully anticipate what the course would offer. Each year, information about PELE is sent to all first-year PhD candidates who speak English as an additional language, yet not all feel compelled—or ready—to sign up. Some who recognise the potential benefit still hesitate, deterred by

self-consciousness, competing priorities, or uncertainty about its value. Han and Lyu, however, stepped forward.

Han's decision was especially striking given his history of English-related trauma. Despite painful memories from earlier schooling, he continued, "in secret," to study English and ultimately applied for a PhD in an English-speaking country. This persistence revealed a determination to move beyond past wounds in pursuit of his academic and personal aspirations.

Lyu's growth orientation showed in her ongoing self-observation. She recognised not only her difficulties in casual social interactions and her tendency to compare herself with native speakers, but also her defensive attitude in her relationship with her supervisor. Rather than ignoring these patterns, she drew on the communication skills she learned in PELE to address them directly, taking courageous steps to adjust her approach and foster a more open, productive relationship.

Both narratives reflect a deep-seated courage, a willingness to reflect honestly, and resilience in the face of vulnerability. Their readiness to act on this longing to grow was amplified through PELE, which became a transformative space in their doctoral journeys.

6.3.2 Desire to give back

For both Han and Lyu, their longing for growth was inseparable from their desire to help others and give back to the community that had supported them. After completing the PELE course, they—like many students who had only just gained enough confidence for themselves—were initially hesitant to apply as mentors. I still remember their uncertainty about whether they could truly be of help. Yet, when encouraged to focus on their intention to support others rather than on their lingering fear of delivering a "perfect" performance, they found a greater sense of ease.

What struck me most was how, despite the heavy workload and challenges of their PhD studies, they returned to mentor in PELE term after term. Later, I learned of Lyu's momentary doubt and deep reflection, not about having enough time, but about having enough energy. Her reflection on this distinction was deeply inspiring, showing a rare level of self-awareness and commitment to sustaining her contributions without compromising her well-being.

7. Conclusion: A story of hope

This study has offered a rare space for the authentic voices of students to be heard in an academic publication. Han and Lyu's narratives reveal that the core issues international students face are not simply about linguistic deficits, but about the intersections of internalised pressure, systemic expectations, and identity negotiation. When fear, anxiety, and stress dominate, learning stalls, feedback feels like an attack, and students shut down. We all know this from personal experience, so it is worth asking why support for international students remains so fragmented when their challenges clearly call for a holistic approach.

Their stories also shed light on a deeper, systemic concern: the unintended harm caused by an overemphasis on the *form* of English, such as grammar perfection, native-like pronunciation for example, rather than its true function as a tool for self-expression and connection. This narrow focus can erode students' well-being, as vividly demonstrated in both narratives, where linguistic insecurity fed isolation,

self-doubt, and missed opportunities. These findings call for a rethinking of current segmented English teaching practices and an urgent shift towards holistic, human-centred approaches that value communication, confidence, and connection as much as correctness.

In PELE, three factors worked together to create a lasting impact: the *"It's okay"* message that normalised imperfection and dismantled years of shame; the community as an emotional infrastructure that enabled risk-taking and deep reflection; and a humanising pedagogy that recognised students as whole people, not just language learners. These conditions did not replace the need for personal agency, but amplified it—both Han and Lyu met these opportunities with courage, openness, and a willingness to contribute back to the community that had supported them.

It is heartening that something as simple as hearing "It's okay" inspired them to keep going, but it is also a reminder of how rarely students are given space to pause, reflect, and be met with patience and respect. PELE was not born from a grand vision of enhancing well-being or belonging; it grew from listening to students, responding to their needs, and allowing them the autonomy to choose what and how they want to learn. Given this space, they did not merely survive, but thrived—and became eager to help others do the same.

The story of Han and Lyu is, above all, a story of hope: hope that when educators pause, personalise, and humanise their approach, students can not only overcome immediate barriers but grow into confident, resilient contributors to their communities. This is a call for educators to create spaces where learners are met as whole people and supported to flourish—because when they do, the impact reaches far beyond the classroom.

Acknowledgement of AI use

We acknowledge that ChatGPT4 was used to assist with language editing and to support thematic analysis. All content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this work are entirely original, and full responsibility for them rests with the authors.

Author details

Mira Kim*, Kwanghee Han and Yongxin Lyu
UNSW, Sydney, Australia

*Address all correspondence to: mira.kim@unsw.edu.au

IntechOpen

© 2025 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. CC BY

References

[1] Andrade MS. International students in English-speaking universities adjustment factors. Journal of Research in International Education. 2006;**5**(2):131-154

[2] Wei M, Heppner PP, Mallen MJ, Ku TY, Liao KYH, Wu TF. Acculturative stress, perfectionism, years in the United States, and depression among Chinese international students. Journal of Counseling Psychology. 2007;**54**(4):385-394

[3] Wang Y, Wang X, Wang X, Guo X, Yuan L, Gao Y, et al. Stressors in university life and anxiety symptoms among international students: A sequential mediation model. BMC Psychiatry. 2023;**23**(1):556

[4] Bista K. Touching the elephant: A holistic approach to understanding international student experiences. Journal of International Students. 2019;**9**(4):i-v

[5] Minutillo S, Cleary M, Hills AP, Visentin D. Mental health considerations for international students. Issues in Mental Health Nursing. 2020;**41**(6):494-499

[6] Atobatele FA, Kpodo PC, Eke IO. Strategies for enhancing international student retention: A critical literature review. Open Access Research Journal of Science and Technology. 2024;**10**(2):035-045

[7] Kim M. A personalised autonomous model to resolve a prolonged dilemma in international students' English language needs in higher education. Higher Education Research and Development. 2023;**42**(3):603-618

[8] Kim M, Black S, Clifton J. Evidence-based holistic approach to supporting international students' English language proficiency needs and wellbeing: The impact of personalized autonomous learning. Applied Linguistics. 2024;**46**(4):668-690

[9] Kim M, Clifton J, Strutt A. Enhancing English language proficiency and well-being in EAL international PhD students: The impact of personalised autonomous learning. Innovative Higher Education. 2024;**49**(2):271-298

[10] Dangeni D. Student engagement: A critical conceptualisation of the complexity of the international students' experiences. Journal of International Students. 2023;**14**(3):227-233

[11] Rosenberg MB. Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life: Empathy, Collaboration, Authenticity, Freedom. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press; 2003. 244 p

[12] Kim M, Jing B. Becoming a learner again: Implications for autonomy teacher education. In: Pedagogies for Autonomy in Language Teacher Education. London: Routledge; 2024. pp. 136-151

[13] Clandinin DJ, Connelly FM. Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research. 1st ed, 1. PB print. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, Calif; 2000. 211 p. (The Jossey-Bass education series)

[14] Karalis Noel T, Minematsu A, Bosca N. Collective autoethnography as a transformative narrative methodology. International Journal of Qualitative Methods. 2023;**22**:16094069231203944

[15] Gregersen T, Horwitz EK. Language learning and perfectionism: Anxious and non-anxious language learners' reactions to their own oral performance. The Modern Language Journal. 2002;**86**(4):562-570

[16] Phillipson R. Linguistic Imperialism. Oxford [England]/New York: Oxford University Press; 1992. 365 p

[17] Peirce BN. Social identity, investment, and language learning. TESOL Quarterly. 1995;**29**(1):9

[18] Miller R. Beyond reductionism: The emerging holistic paradigm in education. Humanistic Psychologist. 2000;**28**(1-3):382-393

[19] Vygotsky. Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1978