

English-speaking international students' perceptions and experiences in a bilingual university: A geographical approach to linguistic capital

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Key Messages

- Given the uneven language geographies of uOttawa and Ottawa-Gatineau, our participants' diverse profiles serve to document international students' complex language experiences.
- International students' linguistic capital in interaction with linguistic power dynamics in different social spaces shapes their experiences and perceptions of Canada's official languages.
- Our findings reveal the role of context in influencing the value of linguistic capital and its convertibility into other forms of cultural and economic capital.

In this study, we adopt Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital to investigate English-speaking international students' diverse language experiences in the unique bilingual context of the University of Ottawa, the world's largest English-French bilingual university. Our aim is to advance understanding of the role of linguistic capital and its convertibility into cultural and economic capital by paying close attention to the linguistic power dynamics in different social spaces (on/off campus) and spheres of activity (e.g., academic studies, employment, language learning). We adopted a qualitative methodology and conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with English-speaking international graduate students from diverse countries of origin, with varied language skills, and enrolled in a variety of academic programs. We discuss four main themes: 1) preparation for and transition to a bilingual university, 2) employment and bilingualism, 3) perceptions of linguistic power dynamics in different social spaces, and 4) motivations and opportunities to acquire new linguistic capital.

Keywords: international students, linguistic capital, Ottawa-Gatineau, bilingualism, language geographies

Perceptions et expériences d'étudiants internationaux anglophones dans une université bilingue: Une approche géographique à l'égard du capital linguistique

Dans la présente étude, nous utilisons le concept bourdieusien de capital linguistique pour examiner les diverses expériences linguistiques d'étudiants internationaux anglophones dans le contexte bilingue unique de l'Université d'Ottawa, la plus importante université bilingue (français-anglais) au monde. Notre objectif est de faire progresser la compréhension du rôle du capital linguistique et sa convertibilité en capital culturel et économique en portant une attention particulière à la dynamique du pouvoir linguistique dans différents espaces sociaux (à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur du campus) et des diverses sphères d'activité (p. ex., études universitaires, emploi, apprentissage d'une langue). Pour ce faire, nous avons adopté une méthodologie qualitative en effectuant 13 entrevues semi-structurées avec des étudiants internationaux anglophones

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de 2^e et 3^e cycles provenant de multiples pays d'origine, avec diverses compétences linguistiques et inscrits dans un éventail de programmes universitaires. Plus précisément, nous abordons quatre principaux thèmes: 1) préparation et transition vers une université bilingue, 2) emploi et bilinguisme, 3) perceptions de la dynamique du pouvoir linguistique dans différents espaces sociaux, et 4) motivations et possibilités d'acquérir un nouveau capital linguistique.

Mots clés : étudiants internationaux, capital linguistique, Ottawa-Gatineau, bilinguisme, géographies des langues

Introduction

In an era of increased global mobility, international students have become one of the fastest-growing migrant groups in Canada. Recruiting such students is considered significant both for increasing the revenues of Canadian post-secondary institutions, and for stimulating local economies and building a highly skilled labour force (Walsh 2014; Kim and Kwak 2019). International students represented 16.2% of Canada's total university enrolment in 2018/2019, an increase from 6.4% in 2008/2009 (Statistics Canada 2020). Although they benefit from quality education, intercultural experiences, and overseas credentials when studying in Canada (Waters 2009; Kim and Kwak 2019), it is important to recognize that international students also face multiple challenges, from navigating a new academic system to dealing with financial pressures and overcoming linguistic and social isolation (Scott et al. 2015; Tavares 2020). These issues are even more significant considering that international students hail from increasingly diverse countries of origin (Canadian Bureau for International Education 2018) and that a growing share of them come to Canada with the goal of obtaining a postgraduation work permit that may then lead to permanent residence (Esses et al. 2018; Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2019).

Our study examines English-speaking international students' experiences with and perceptions of English-French bilingualism within the unique bilingual context of the University of Ottawa (uOttawa) and Ottawa-Gatineau, Canada's National Capital Region. We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with international graduate students from diverse countries of origin and enrolled in various academic programs, who arrived with varied language skills but had English as their first official language. In our analysis, we adopt Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital—individuals' ability to speak a society's dominant language(s) as a form of embodied cultural capital that in turn can be converted into other forms of

capital (Nawyn et al. 2012)—to advance understanding of the role of language skills in shaping international students' experiences. Specifically, we pay attention to the linguistic power dynamics in different social spaces and fields of activity, and the convertibility of linguistic capital into other forms of cultural and economic capital.

After a review of the relevant literature pertaining to international students' experiences and linguistic capital, we provide contextual information on uOttawa and the language geographies of Ottawa-Gatineau. Next, we describe our methodology and participant profile. We then discuss four main themes emerging from our findings regarding how linguistic capital influences international students' experiences in relation to different fields of activity: 1) preparation for and transition to a bilingual university, 2) employment and bilingualism, 3) perceptions of linguistic power dynamics in different social spaces, and 4) motivations and opportunities to acquire new linguistic capital. We conclude by highlighting the empirical and theoretical insights gained from our study, and directions for future research.

International students' experiences and linguistic capital

A growing number of studies on international students examines the role of language skills in various spheres of activity, including their academic studies, sense of belonging, social interactions, and employment. These studies, however, were generally conducted in unilingual contexts where English is the sole official language and thus the primary form of linguistic capital required—including Australia, the United States (US), and English-speaking Canada. Furthermore, they tend to either focus on specific ethnocultural groups (especially Chinese students; see Waters 2009; Kim and Kwak 2019; Tavares 2020), or treat international students as one homogenous group (e.g.,

Nunes and Arthur 2013) with little consideration for differences among them.

Zhou et al. (2020) reported that Chinese international graduate students' English language ability was a primary factor restraining them from participating in Canadian classrooms. In contrast, Briguglio and Smith (2012) found that a lack of English language skills had little impact on Chinese international students' academic performance in an Australian university, except for "language-rich" subjects such as business law. The same cohort of Chinese students, however, felt a sense of exclusion from the broader campus community due to language barriers. Similarly, Yao (2016) found that Chinese international students in a US university wanted but were struggling to engage in English conversations, and therefore were unable to develop meaningful relationships with domestic students in their residence halls. Moreover, Briguglio and Smith (2012) and Yao (2016) noted in their studies that Chinese students made conscious efforts to improve their English language skills by reading pre-lecture handouts, hiring English-language tutors, and choosing to live on campus with domestic students. Meanwhile, Benzie (2010) found that international students in Australia were not able to develop sufficiently advanced language skills in English to be employment-ready at the time of graduation due to a combination of factors (e.g., socializing with other international students, little access to immersion like environments), which impacted their pathways to permanent residency. With regard to employment, Nunes and Arthur (2013) found that after graduating from a western Canadian university some international students were concerned about employment discrimination on grounds of weaker English language skills.

The existing literature thus shows that the role of language skills differs in shaping international students' experiences in relation to different fields of activity. Nevertheless, these studies provide limited empirical and theoretical insights into the varied experiences of international students from diverse countries of origin and with diverse forms of linguistic capital. We now turn to the concept of linguistic capital that will inform our study.

Sociologist Bourdieu's (1986) theorization of "capital" sheds light on the varied forms of resources that individuals hold and the power structures that determine the value of each type

of resources (or capital) that in turn enable or disable individuals' participation in given fields of activity. He identifies four separate forms of capital: cultural (e.g., language skills, qualifications), economic (e.g., employment, wealth), social (e.g., personal networks), and symbolic (e.g., social recognition and power). Moreover, Bourdieu argued that each form of capital can be converted into the others—for example, qualifications and language skills (cultural capital) can lead to better employment (economic capital). For the purposes of our study, cultural capital is the most relevant; it can be further conceptualized as presenting itself in three main states: "embodied" refers to its manifestation in or through one's body (e.g., language ability); "objectified" means that it can be displayed through cultural artifacts; and it is "institutionalized" when recognized by institutions in the form of qualifications (e.g., credentials) (Bourdieu 1986; Waters 2012).

Most literature (e.g., Waters 2012; Blackmore et al. 2017) on international students' mobility addresses primarily the accumulation of embodied and institutionalized cultural capital, and examines their convertibility into other forms of capital. Waters (2012) argues that overseas education enables international students to acquire cultural capital—such as language ability (embodied) and academic credentials (institutionalized) that in turn can be translated into economic capital (e.g., better employment prospects) in their home country's labour market. This process contributes to the "reproduction of social advantages" (i.e., capital) of the global middle class who invest significant economic resources in overseas education (Waters 2012, 130). The value and convertibility of cultural capital, however, are dependent on context and the particular power structures and social relations associated with given fields of activity (Huot 2017). In his conceptualization of linguistic capital, Bourdieu (1991) underlines the role of power relations specifically in embodied forms of cultural capital by referring to what Nawyn et al. (2012, 258) describe as "the acquired skill of speaking a dominant or 'official' language." In migration contexts, the notion of linguistic capital has been applied to understand immigrants' and refugees' social and economic integration into the linguistic norms and power structures of receiving societies (Creese 2010). Huot et al. (2020) investigated the role of immigrants'

linguistic capital in shaping their occupational prospects in London, Ontario. They found that immigrants' pre-existing linguistic capital (i.e., their ability to speak French and/or non-official languages) was only valued in the workplace and thus convertible into economic capital if they demonstrated strong skills in English—the local dominant official language. Consequently, immigrants felt the societal pressure to improve their English skills in order to regain their linguistic capital and prevent further economic marginalization. Next, Nawyn et al. (2012) examined the non-economic value of linguistic capital in facilitating Burundian and Burmese refugees' social integration in the state of Michigan. They found that a lack of English skills—the valued form of linguistic capital in an English-dominant context—hindered refugees' ability to develop social capital, that is, interpersonal connections that could provide information to community resources and foster a sense of belonging.

These studies underline the power relations between different languages—official language majorities, non-official language groups, and official language minorities—that determine the value and convertibility of individuals' linguistic capital, thus shaping immigrants' and refugees' settlement experiences and integration outcomes (Nawyn et al. 2012; Huot et al. 2020). Our aim is to use linguistic capital in order to advance understanding of the role of language in international students' experiences within the complex language geographies of uOttawa and Ottawa-Gatineau. In addition to examining the conversion of linguistic capital into other forms of cultural and economic capital in the fields of academic studies and employment, we will investigate international students' perceptions of the linguistic power dynamics in different social spaces (e.g., on and off campus, in classrooms, different workplaces) and their ability to acquire new linguistic capital.

Case study

uOttawa is the largest English-French bilingual university in the world and is located in Ottawa, Ontario. Ottawa is situated on the interprovincial border with Quebec and together with its neighbour, Gatineau, forms Canada's National Capital Region. As a result of its unique geographical

location, the region reflects the country's complex language geographies. At the national level, Canada has recognized both English and French as official languages since the first *Official Language Act* of 1969, but in practice the country is not uniformly bilingual. In particular, the province of Quebec is primarily French-speaking and its provincial laws are protective of the French language, whereas the province of Ontario is primarily English-speaking. Yet both provinces have sizable official language minorities—8.9% Anglophones in Quebec, and 4.3% Francophones in Ontario (Statistics Canada 2017)—that enjoy provincial recognition and rights to access public services in their language, including education (Ray and Gilbert 2020).

These complex language geographies are reproduced locally in Ottawa-Gatineau. Both English and French are commonly spoken, and rates of bilingualism are high (Table 1); language groups, however, are unevenly distributed across the interprovincial border which separates the linguistically distinct provinces and cities of Ontario and Ottawa (English-speaking), and Quebec and Gatineau (French-speaking) (Gilbert et al. 2014). According to the 2016 Census, Anglophones and Francophones represent about 63.6% and 17.3% respectively of the population in Ottawa, compared to 15.0% and 77.6% respectively in Gatineau. But since Gatineau's population is one-third the size of Ottawa's, the share of Francophones (32.5%) across the region is smaller than that of Anglophones (51.4%). Francophone minorities in Ottawa experience ongoing linguistic assimilation pressures (Ray and Gilbert 2020). Despite the City of Ottawa's efforts to provide public services in both languages, the quantity and quality of services in French are considerably lesser compared to those in English (Ray and Gilbert 2020). Similarly, Anglophone minorities in Gatineau have limited access to public services in English and are underrepresented in municipal politics (Gilbert et al. 2014).

In recent decades, the local language geographies have been changing as more immigrants settle in the region, representing 21.9% of the population in 2016 (Statistics Canada 2017). According to Ray and Gilbert (2020), Ottawa-Gatineau's Anglophone and Francophone populations are in competition to integrate newcomers as members of their respective official-language group, which in turn can alter the balance between the two languages within the region. Moreover, the growing presence of

Table 1

Selected demographics in Ottawa-Gatineau (CMA), Ottawa (CMA-Ontario part), and Gatineau (CMA-Quebec part) in 2016

	Ottawa-Gatineau		Ottawa		Gatineau	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Total population	1,323,783		991,726		332,057	
Place of birth						
Total	1,300,730	100	973,345	100	327,390	100
Canada	1,016,405	78.1	728,810	74.9	287,595	87.8
Foreign-born	284,330	21.9	244,535	25.1	39,795	12.2
Mother tongue (single or multiple responses)						
Total	1,309,210	100	980,275	100	328,935	100
English	673,105	51.4	623,805	63.6	49,310	15.0
French	425,025	32.5	169,785	17.3	255,250	77.6
Non-official language	258,075	19.7	223,925	22.8	34,150	10.4
Knowledge of both English and French	586,205	44.8	377,300	38.5	208,905	63.5

SOURCE: Statistics Canada (2017).

immigrants has led to an increased share of the population (19.7%) with non-official languages as their mother tongue, of which the top three are Arabic, Chinese languages, and Spanish (Statistics Canada 2017; Ray and Gilbert 2020).

The region's unique language dynamics also manifest themselves in Ottawa-Gatineau's labour market. The federal government is the largest single employer in the area (Gilbert et al. 2014); 22.1% of workers in the region were employed in public administration in 2016 (Ray 2021). Reflecting the official status of both languages nationwide, the federal government functions in both English and French, thus influencing the linguistic requirements of employment in the region. Further, jobs in other sectors are also heavily dependent on the government in addition to catering to the region's English- and French-speaking populations, and therefore often have specific bilingualism requirements (Bazinet 2021; Ray 2021).

In turn, uOttawa's bilingualism can be interpreted as a micro-scale reflection of Canada's bilingualism ambitions. While the university provides all on-campus services in both English and French, not all academic programs and courses are necessarily available in both languages. In 2019, 70.8% of registered students preferred English as their first language of instruction, compared to only 29.2% for French (uOttawa 2020). Although English and French are not spoken in equal proportion on campus, uOttawa has implemented a number of policies and programs to maintain

and promote its bilingual status, including French immersion programs for primarily English-speaking undergraduate students, a differential tuition fee exemption for international students enrolled in a French or French immersion program, and an Official Language and Bilingualism Institute that offers English and French as second language courses. Full-time graduate students, including international students, are eligible to enroll in second language courses at no cost.

In addition, uOttawa has made significant efforts to recruit international students from a wide range of countries in response to the increased global competition in the higher education industry (Office of the President 2017). From 2009 to 2020, the number of international students at uOttawa increased from 1,929 (5.4%) to 8,653 (19.4%) (uOttawa 2020). In particular, international students accounted for 29.4% of graduate students registered in 2020, of which over 88.6% were enrolled in English programs (uOttawa 2020).

Methodology

The findings presented here are part of a larger project on the experiences of English- and French-speaking international graduate students at uOttawa. We adopted a qualitative methodological approach in order to better grasp the complexities and nuances inherent to participants' experiences (Hay 2016). We found that English- and French-speaking international students had markedly

different experiences—due in part to differences in their English and French language skills, the availability and nature of graduate programs offered in each language, and the uneven presence and power of each language on campus (French being a minority language). Given these important differences, our focus in this paper is on the findings of semi-structured interviews with 13 English-speaking international graduate students, who form a more cohesive group and thus allow for more consistent analysis.

After obtaining ethics approval, we collected our data from November 2019 to early March 2020. Through posters on campus, social media posts, and uOttawa student networks, we recruited full-time international students, aged 18 and older, registered in a graduate program, and whose first official language was English. They each gave informed consent, filled out a survey with basic demographic information, and received a \$20 gift card in acknowledgement for their time and contribution. Lasting from 50 to 80 minutes, the interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and guided by a list of open-ended questions on various themes: pre-arrival awareness of the university; post-arrival experiences with languages/bilingualism, academics, employment, social connections, and support services; and post-graduation plans. We undertook a thematic analysis of interview data in multiple steps. First, we read the verbatim transcripts of all the interviews to get a sense of their contents. Second, we coded them using the main themes of the interview guide. Then, following an iterative process, we coded the data by focusing on participants' language experiences from pre-arrival preparation to academic studies, employment, language learning, and their perceptions of the campus's and the region's linguistic dynamics.

The diversity of our participants' profile provides an opportunity to gauge international students' varied experiences with regard to language, and their perspectives on its role in shaping these experiences that better reflects the growing diversity of this group both at uOttawa and elsewhere. As shown in Table 2, participants were women ($n = 7$) and men ($n = 6$) across different age groups, from 12 countries of origin (two were from the same country), and had been in Canada for various lengths of time. Five participants had previously completed a university degree in North America:

Table 2

Selected demographic characteristics of interview participants

Demographic characteristics	Number of participants
Gender	
Female	7
Male	6
Age groups	
18–24	4
25–34	6
35–54	3
Length of stay in Canada	
Less than 1 year	5
1 to less than 2 years	4
2 to less than 3 years	2
3 years or more	2
Countries of origin	
Armenia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil (2), China, Egypt, Ghana, India, Libya, Slovakia, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States	
Faculty	
Engineering (4), Arts (3), Social Sciences (2), Education (1), Health Sciences (1), Law (1), and Management (1)	
Self-rated official language proficiency	
<i>English</i>	
Elementary to no knowledge	0
Intermediate	2
Advanced or fluent	10
No response	1
<i>French</i>	
Elementary to no knowledge	10
Intermediate	2
Advanced or fluent	0
No response	1

two in Canada and three in the US. Across seven distinct faculties, six participants were pursuing a master's degree and seven were pursuing a PhD degree; seven participants were in their first year of study, while the rest were in their second year or above.

Most participants had the linguistic capital and the credentials required to be accepted into a graduate program. For some, English was their mother tongue, others learned it at a young age, while for others it was a colonial language. Even though many variations of English exist, participants did not express facing challenges with this language, except for P7 who had to learn it upon arrival. In contrast, most self-reported basic or little knowledge of French, except for P9 and P13 who arrived with an intermediate level. Two participants were in programs with bilingual requirements (P9 and P11). In terms of future plans,

eleven participants were considering staying in Canada for another degree or applying for a post-graduation work permit, and eight were planning to become permanent residents.

Results and discussion

Participating international students discussed extensively their experiences with the complex geographies of language and bilingualism at uOttawa and in Ottawa-Gatineau. We organized the findings around four key themes: 1) preparation for and transition to a bilingual university, 2) employment and bilingualism, 3) perceptions of linguistic power dynamics in different social spaces, and 4) motivations and opportunities to acquire new linguistic capital. In our analysis, we examined how context shapes the value and convertibility of participants' linguistic capital, thus influencing their experiences with bilingualism within different fields of activity. Moreover, we were attentive to the role of power structures and their ability in negotiating the uneven geographies of English, French, and bilingualism on campus and in the region.

Preparation for and transition to a bilingual university

We first discuss participants' pre-arrival knowledge of uOttawa's bilingualism and the adequacy of their linguistic capital in fulfilling the language requirements of their program and enabling their participation in academic activities. We found that the complexity of uOttawa's bilingualism across different academic programs is not necessarily apparent to international students and is difficult for them to grasp before arrival. Consequently, their post-arrival experiences with bilingualism varied depending on multiple factors: whether their academic program had bilingual requirements, their awareness of these requirements, their level of preparation to meet them, and the linguistic practices and culture of their program.

Among our participants, eleven were enrolled in programs that were fully instructed in English, one (P9) was in a bilingual program (i.e., with bilingual courses), and one (P11) was in an English-instructed program with bilingual requirements (i.e., taking at least one bilingual course). We learned that among those in the first group, six arrived with no or

limited understanding of uOttawa's bilingualism and the region's language geographies, but were not affected academically after arrival. The other five participants became aware of bilingualism mainly through the uOttawa website, but only one pro-actively undertook more research to ensure that he had all the information needed to assess the potential impacts of bilingualism on his studies:

I read a lot about it. First of all, I had to make sure I could take classes only in English, right? That was my first worry, bilingual university, does it mean I have to learn both languages? No, it doesn't, right? So, from that point when I found out that, it was, you can take classes in English only, or in French only if you want. (P5)

Enrolled in an English-instructed program, he was reassured after finding out that bilingualism did not entail taking any courses in French. For the four other participants who were also aware, bilingualism played a neutral or even positive role in their decision to enroll at uOttawa. They anticipated that their pre-existing linguistic capital (i.e., English skills) was adequate to obtain their academic credentials—a form of institutionalized cultural capital—and in some cases were drawn by the opportunity to develop a new form of linguistic capital (i.e., French skills) through their studies at a bilingual university.

The cases of P9 and P11, whose programs had bilingual requirements, illustrate that students may have different experiences with bilingualism, and that bilingualism requirements can have significantly different impacts on their studies. When P9 first learned about the bilingualism requirement of her program through email interactions with her supervisor, she decided to look at other English-language universities. But eventually, she chose to study at uOttawa because of shared research interests with her supervisor. Moreover, at the time of admission, she was required to sign a document informing her of the obligation to meet the program's bilingualism requirements. She thus made significant efforts to develop her linguistic capital, spending over six months before arrival improving her French skills to an intermediate level. But after arrival, it turned out that taking bilingual courses was not as challenging as anticipated:

It's good that in class we don't need to speak in French, we only need to understand it.... For one of

my courses, half of the course is in English and the second half is in French. But everybody prefers speaking in English, so the students speak in English and the professor talks in French. And sometimes when we don't understand [the professor] will talk in English; but we have a lot of discussion groups and most of it is in English because everybody is more comfortable speaking in English. (P9)

Despite the label, in practice her “bilingual courses” were English-dominant because there were more English-speaking students. Moreover, the professor was relatively flexible and considerate towards students who had weaker skills in French.

In contrast, P11 had a different experience with bilingualism both during the university application process and in practice:

One of the things they said on the website, when I was applying, that this is a bilingual university, but you have the right to do your degree in either English or French. And so, for me, that was a very comforting place because I was like “alright, cool, I can do it in English.” ... But it really is in your best interest to be able to function in at least some French. I don't think that what they say is necessarily reflected in the way that it actually works.... [uOttawa said] “You can do it in English,” and then I came, once I was accepted, I look at my course schedule and it says very clearly that one of your classes has to be in French. (P11)

His account suggests that the pre-arrival information he received was not necessarily clear. He understood uOttawa's bilingualism as giving the option to complete a degree in English only; he was not aware of the bilingualism requirements of his program when applying and deciding to enrol. Consequently, he did not prepare to study in French. The second issue P11 faced was that in practice, bilingualism in his program involved discussions and course materials presented exclusively in French, which made it more difficult for those without linguistic capital in that language to understand and participate:

It's a bilingual department.... We have a lot of French professors and French students.... I had an experience a couple of weeks ago, where I went to a meeting and I couldn't understand about 60% of what was said during the meeting. Even though the meeting was supposed to be a bilingual meeting, a lot of it was in French.... I think sometimes

people can default to French very easily if they're comfortable in that space and not consider that this is a bilingual university. (P11)

In other words, bilingualism can operate differently depending on the program of study—including the linguistic culture and power dynamics in the department and classroom space, and the linguistic capital of students and professors. Whereas P9's bilingual classroom was mostly English-dominant, in P11's department the use of French was relatively equal and sometimes dominant. In practice, these varied, embodied forms of bilingualism at uOttawa are significant in determining the value of international students' linguistic capital and their ability to succeed in academic studies, especially for those who are not properly informed, and who in turn may not be able to make informed decisions and/or prepare adequately. Nevertheless, these two cases were rather isolated; the majority of participating international students could complete their degree entirely in English and did not perceive bilingualism as a challenge in the process of converting their linguistic capital into institutionalized cultural capital.

Employment and bilingualism

Being able to work is important for international students to finance their studies. In Canada, they are legally allowed to work full-time on campus, or up to 20 hours per week off campus during a full-time semester (IRCC 2020). But the bilingual context of uOttawa and Ottawa-Gatineau presents unique linguistic challenges. Aligned with previous research (Nunes and Arthur 2013; Huot et al. 2020), we found that many participating international students were put at a disadvantage because they lacked the linguistic capital required in the local labour market, which in this case involves skills in both official languages. Yet our findings suggest that the language requirements associated with employment opportunities varied depending on whether students sought employment on or off campus, their field of study, and/or the type of occupation.

As shown in Table 3, eight participants felt that bilingualism represented a challenge in their employment aspirations on and/or off campus. Among them, six faced language barriers when seeking jobs or working on campus. It is important

Table 3
Participants' perceptions of employment challenges due to bilingualism

Participant	Employment on campus	Employment off campus
P1	X	
P2		
P3	X	X
P4		X
P5	X	X
P6		
P7	X	X
P8		
P9		
P10	X	X
P11		X
P12	X	
P13		

to note that all services provided at uOttawa—e.g., library, academic writing help centre, mentorship program, cafeteria—are fully bilingual. Applicants are thus expected to know both English and French. P10 explained:

I can't apply for any mentorship here [at uOttawa] because they need someone with French language.... You have other languages, like Russian and Belorussian. Who cares about those languages? Because those aren't mainstream languages here. It's not very pleasant because *you can't really use opportunities to earn money*. (P10; emphasis added)

Congruent with Huot et al.'s (2020) findings, P10's pre-existing linguistic capital in non-official languages (i.e., Russian and Belorussian) was devalued when applying for jobs on campus due to uOttawa's bilingualism and her lack of French skills. Her comment ("you can't really use opportunities to earn money") alludes to the challenge of converting linguistic capital into economic capital.

P3 also shared the view that uOttawa's bilingualism focuses on official languages that are dominant, but devalues non-official languages. According to her, this represents a form of exclusion to accessing employment and volunteer opportunities on campus; she thus questioned its fairness:

I really think bilingualism is a kind of tokenism because there are apparently many more languages that are minority languages, not only French. Chinese has a big population or even German has a really

big population, why only promote French and not Chinese? But apparently, if you promote Chinese as a third language, it would benefit a lot of citizens here, right? (P3)

We do not interpret her response to represent a rejection of official-language bilingualism, but rather a different rationale regarding which languages should be prioritized. She thought non-official minority languages should be given as much weight and support as English and French. Her perspective raises questions regarding the value given to different languages in light of the growing presence of non-official language communities in the region (Ray and Gilbert 2020). But considering the struggles of Francophone minorities in Ontario, the question remains how uOttawa ought to adapt its bilingualism policies to the growing share of international students and the changing language geographies in the region, and yet not compromise the language and education rights of Francophone minorities.

Meanwhile, five participants were working as teaching assistants (TAs). For this particular job, the language requirements vary depending on the language of the course (English or French); but the bilingual nature of uOttawa still presented an additional challenge. P5, who was a TA for a course in English, commented:

With TA positions it's always better if you know both languages because some courses are offered only in English, but students might prefer French to speak to you. So, I had a situation where a student would come to my office hours, and their English is ok, but they would feel much more comfortable in French, so that would be nice if I could speak French as well to actually better connect with the student. (P5)

His experience suggests that students enrolled in an English-instructed course at uOttawa could be primarily French-speaking, which made it more complicated for him to communicate with them. Thus, even if a job on campus is advertised as "English only," in practice the language dynamics are still fluid, and therefore having skills in the other official language is advantageous.

Next, off-campus employment opportunities were also important for participants, especially those who planned to apply for a post-graduation work permit and permanent residency in Canada. We found two contrasting experiences depending on the students' field of study. It emerged that,

compared to students in engineering, most participants pursuing degrees in arts and humanities, social sciences, and education were more concerned about the specific type of linguistic capital (i.e., English-French bilingualism) required in the local labour market. For example, P5 referred to the bilingualism requirement in the public sector: “That’s on my mind all the time. If you want a managerial position in the government you need to speak French, that’s the requirement.”

P11 described the difficulty seeking employment in the service sector: “I probably couldn’t get a customer service job in Ottawa because I’m not bilingual.... I’m a PhD student studying grand philosophical theories and I probably cannot get basic kinds of employment, because they tell you ‘you need to be bilingual.’” It is worth noting that P11’s response is consistent with Nunes and Arthur’s (2013) findings, in which international students felt being discriminated against in the Canadian labour market because of their lack of skills in the dominant language(s).

For participants studying in engineering, three out of four stated that the labour market in their specialized field tends to be English dominant, and thus there are fewer bilingualism requirements. For example, P2 found out that she did not have to be bilingual to find a government job:

For the job situation, I thought that the government jobs might require French, to be bilingual.... I was interested in a government job but that was English. But I was always under the impression that to get a government job you need to be fully bilingual, but that’s not the case. (P2)

Our participants’ experiences reveal the complex constraints international students face in Ottawa-Gatineau’s labour market due to bilingualism. They confront a mismatch between the linguistic capital they bring and the local needs, especially on the uOttawa campus, which represents a significant disadvantage to access much-needed jobs and acquire economic capital. Yet there appears to be some flexibility regarding bilingualism off campus depending on the professional field.

Perceptions of linguistic power dynamics in different social spaces

In addition to how language dynamics in different social spaces shape participants’ linguistic capital

and their experiences, we were interested in examining their varied perceptions of bilingualism and linguistic power dynamics in relation to the uneven language geographies of the uOttawa campus and Ottawa-Gatineau. Many participants noted that uOttawa’s bilingualism mandate contributes to creating a more multicultural campus because it helps attract both English- and French-speaking international students from a diversity of countries:

I find it [bilingualism] good. Maybe that’s one of the reasons why it’s such a multicultural place [uOttawa]. Because if you embrace both languages, you equally respect those languages, and it shows there’s not a superior one and you increase the possibility of other people coming here—because some people don’t know English but they know French so they can come here; some people don’t know French but they do know English so they can come here as well. (P9)

Others suggested that the uOttawa campus was an especially tolerant space that is distinct from the rest of the region. P5 recounted the contrasting experiences he had on and off campus with regard to his accent in English. Working at a call centre in Ottawa, he received explicit comments on his accent from colleagues and clients. But on uOttawa’s linguistically diverse campus his accent was less noticeable:

One of the jobs that I had several days a week was in the call centre, so it was on the phone. So, when I talk to people on the phone they would comment on my accent and other people around the call centre, they probably weren’t as—I don’t mean this in a bad way—but they weren’t as educated or they were not as [much] with people from different cultures.... So, when I actually came to uOttawa, from then on, not many people commented on my accent because it’s so common [to have an accent on campus]. Here nobody notices. (P5)

His experience speaks to the fact that university campuses are generally more diverse, cosmopolitan, and tolerant of differences (Walton-Roberts 2011). Participants suggested that this was even more so at uOttawa due to its bilingual nature. All staff is expected to be fully bilingual and many members of the uOttawa community know two or more languages. Most were not necessarily bilingual prior to joining and therefore

had to learn the other official language, making them aware of the challenge of learning another language, and in turn more tolerant towards varied forms of linguistic capital others may possess. Thus, even though bilingualism creates exclusions for accessing employment, as discussed earlier, it nevertheless contributes to more inclusive and tolerant norms relating to linguistic diversity in social interactions on campus.

With regard to the language geographies of the region, many participants pointed out the linguistic differences between Gatineau (Quebec) and Ottawa (Ontario). Generally, they recognized Gatineau as a French-majority space. But they had divergent views on whether Ottawa constitutes a bilingual city depending on their linguistic capital and also their experiences with other linguistic contexts. To illustrate, we present the contrasting opinions of two participants. First, P11's perception was based on his linguistic capital and his experience of living in Gatineau. Because he did not speak French, he found it difficult to adapt to what he perceived as "French Gatineau." He was more comfortable in Ottawa: "Once I cross that bridge from Quebec to Ontario, it's ok because *Ontario does a better job of being bilingual*" (emphasis added). Interestingly, he considered Ottawa to be "more bilingual" than Gatineau regardless of the fact that bilingualism is relatively uneven and fluid in both cities. His comment reflects the fact that he is comfortable in the dominant language (English) of that space (Ottawa). In other words, his linguistic capital shapes not only his experience with the uneven language geography of the region, but also his perception of levels of bilingualism across the interprovincial border.

On the other hand, P2 offered a different view on Ottawa's bilingualism that was influenced by her previous experience of living in Montreal (located in the French-majority province of Quebec) where she completed her undergraduate degree at an English-language university. Quebec's linguistic landscape is shaped by its language laws that require the use of French signs in all public spaces (Gouvernement du Québec 2020). Compared to Montreal, she considered Ottawa's bilingualism to be less pronounced:

I didn't find anything bilingual [in Ottawa] compared to Quebec. In Quebec, you have everything in French like the street signs ... in the shop they will talk in French. But in Ottawa, I don't find that. They don't

talk in French. So, bilingualism was *a lot more diluted* ... but for a person who just came from an international country, they may find it difficult. (P2; emphasis added)

P2 further noted that her perspective may not be shared by students who were not previously exposed to the French language or to bilingualism. Thus, our findings indicate that participants' perceptions of bilingualism and linguistic power dynamics in different spaces were shaped by their linguistic capital, and also their experiences in different spheres (e.g., employment, social interactions) and linguistic contexts.

Motivations and opportunities to acquire new linguistic capital

Many participants perceived English-French bilingualism skills as a valuable form of linguistic capital for broadening their economic opportunities and social networks in the Ottawa-Gatineau region. They, therefore, expressed a strong interest in learning French. Their priority and ability to do so, however, varied depending on their linguistic capital upon arrival, the need to complete their academic requirements, and their access to and the range of different French immersion opportunities within the complex, fluid language geographies of the region.

We were interested in the opportunities and barriers to learning French. First, we learned that lack of linguistic capital in English (the dominant language) upon arrival was a disadvantage. One participant explained that he "couldn't speak English at all" when he arrived and enrolled in an English intensive learning program at uOttawa. At the time, his primary goal was acquiring linguistic capital in English; he thus found the presence of bilingualism on campus challenging for achieving this goal:

It [bilingualism] was like distracting at the beginning, because some people only speak French, or they speak French more than English. I have to determine whether or not the person I'm talking to can speak English more than French. If the person speaks English more than French, I can communicate with them. (P7)

The other 12 participants arrived with stronger linguistic capital in English. Among them, only six

indicated that they were aware of and interested in taking the free *français langue seconde* (FLS) courses open to full-time graduate students at uOttawa. This option, however, was not feasible for five of them due to time constraints, especially in the first year of their program when they were busy navigating the new academic environment and completing their course requirements—which are important for the acquisition of institutionalized cultural capital. Still, two participants were considering taking FLS courses at a later stage when their schedules may become more flexible. Indeed, only P13 had taken FLS courses since arriving; she did so while in the second year of study. Arguably, compared to other participants she possessed stronger linguistic and cultural capital in the dominant language and academic culture insofar as she was a native English-speaker and had previous experience of studying in North American universities. These findings on participants' varied experiences suggest that for international students embodied cultural/linguistic capital and institutional structures (e.g., program requirements to acquire institutionalized cultural capital) are key to enabling them (or not) to acquire linguistic capital in additional languages.

With regard to accessing French immersion opportunities outside of the classroom, we learned that participants' ability to acquire new linguistic capital varied due to the complex linguistic dynamics in different social spaces. They explained that on the uOttawa campus, most individuals with whom they interacted were bilingual and spoke to them primarily in English. For English-speaking international students, these fluid language dynamics and interactions contributed to making it easier to manage bilingualism on campus; yet simultaneously, they diminished the opportunity to create a French immersion environment, which is an essential component of language learning (Benzie 2010). In order to be fully immersed in a French environment, students had to go off campus, and more specifically to Gatineau. For example, P9 lived in Gatineau and was able to take advantage of the "French immersion-like" environment to develop her linguistic capital:

I'm living in Gatineau, so there's more French. So, I try to practice French. When I'm in a restaurant, I try to order in French. But then if the person asks me a

question I don't understand, then I ask in English and the person responds in English. (P9)

As discussed earlier, P11 perceived Ottawa to be "more bilingual" than Gatineau. Later in the interview, he argued that Anglophones in Ottawa have fewer opportunities to develop their bilingual skills compared to Francophones:

I really do think that the *Anglophones are at a disadvantage in Ottawa*. The *Francophones are taught English*.... But I don't know that the Anglophones are taught French the same way ... which is funny because the Francophones are often complaining that there's not enough French offered. (P11; emphasis added)

As an outsider, he brings a different interpretation to the local language politics—one that reflects his linguistic capital in English. From his perspective, Francophones have more opportunities to improve their linguistic capital because "they are taught English." Many Francophones outside of Quebec, however, experience their linguistic minority status as a form of oppression, struggle, and inequality; from their viewpoint, they are *forced* to speak English in everyday life (Ray and Gilbert 2020). Considering Francophone minorities' historical struggles to access services in French and to have their language rights protected, P11's comment alludes to their assimilation into Ontario's Anglophone-dominant society (Ray and Gilbert 2020). For our participating international students, the region's uneven language geographies and dynamics, nonetheless, result in uneven opportunities to become bilingual.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of 13 semi-structured interviews with English-speaking international graduate students at uOttawa, the world's largest bilingual university, our study contributes to advancing understanding of the role of linguistic capital and international students' language experiences. Empirically, we add to the literature on international student mobility by demonstrating the complex, varied experiences with and perceptions of linguistic dynamics and bilingualism that result from participants' diverse profiles (including pre-existing

linguistic capital) on the one hand, and the unique bilingual context of uOttawa and the Ottawa-Gatineau region on the other. Conceptually, we shed light on the significant role of context and power relations—including in different social spaces (i.e., on/off campus, Ottawa, Gatineau) and fields of activity (i.e., academics, employment, language acquisition)—in the process of converting linguistic capital into other forms of cultural and economic capital. We note that some participants confronted language barriers to their academic and economic integration due to a mismatch between their pre-existing linguistic capital and the varied language requirements that result from different cultures and practices of bilingualism in distinct academic programs and in the local labour market. The recognition and development of their linguistic capital also involve unequal linguistic power dynamics given the uneven social positions and geographical distribution of the official majority, official minority, and non-official language communities (Nawyn et al. 2012; Huot 2017). By looking closely at the value and convertibility of linguistic capital, our study provides novel insights into the predictors of international students' academic success, access to employment, and pathways to permanent residency.

Although the number of our participants is small and our findings may not necessarily be generalizable to other post-secondary institutions, they reflect the growing diversity of international students and may be relevant to universities and colleges in multilingual contexts. For future research, an examination of French-speaking international students at uOttawa can further reveal the varied experiences of this group and the role of linguistic dynamics, since they possess a distinct form of linguistic capital, but one that features a minority language. It would also be valuable to examine the experiences of international students at the undergraduate level, because as a younger age group they simultaneously undergo multiple transitions—a life transition to young adulthood and an academic transition from secondary to post-secondary education. Moreover, future studies about international students' linguistic capital ought to be conducted in other geographical and/or linguistic contexts in order to develop a more robust understanding of how different geographies and language dynamics shape international students' language experiences, the value and convertibility of their linguistic capital, and to create

more equitable opportunities for the recognition and development of their linguistic capital.

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