

How do ID MSc students who are completing their first English-language degree encounter and navigate language barriers in LSE seminars?

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See this project presented by the researcher: <https://youtu.be/sQPX29JZHdY>

If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Background

This project grew out of my prior experience on multilingual professional teams. Despite working at NGOs that aspired toward inclusivity, I found that colleagues who spoke English well but not as a first language tended to get left behind during meetings and group decisions. When under stress, groups composed mostly of native English speakers valued efficiency and routine over taking the time to fully include all points of view. Our English-language learner colleagues found this exhausting and demoralizing— the extra layer of work they were doing and the extra layer of insight they had to offer were both made invisible. Being undervalued harmed them personally and professionally, and our teams missed out on a lot of their expertise. I was left wondering how to build work environments that make better use of what speakers of multiple languages have to give.

This question has obvious bearing on the LSE's ability to reach its 2030 goals, which highlight inclusivity and global impact. Its importance is particularly clear in international development, a field whose success depends on shifting its historically Western-centric viewpoint and whose practice involves extensive work in multilingual teams. Since seminars are graduate school's closest analog to professional meetings and debates, the norms learned in ID seminar classrooms by both native and non-native English speakers are likely to echo into all levels of development practice.

This study examined English-language learners' current experiences within the ID department, creating a starting point for implementing known best practices and/or trying out new ones. It also aimed to make these students' barriers and assets more visible to faculty and classmates, challenging the default view of English and English-language cultures as neutral.

“I have no idea of the meaning and function of “seminar”. I searched online and asked my friends about it. However, the theory differs from the practice. I found every teacher has different strategies and it took me some time to get used to different seminars and to explore my position in a seminar.”

“I thought, ‘it’s gonna be fine, I can speak English.’ Then I got to my first seminar and was like, ‘what the hell is happening?’”

“Many times I feel that I have good arguments to share but it takes me time to formulate them properly and to intervene. Thus, often I do not join the debate because when I am ready to step in, my argument is no more relevant as before.”

Methodology

Immediately after a single ID seminar class of their choice, 18 ID MSc students who are pursuing their first English-language degree each completed a reflection on what they perceived, thought, felt, and did before, during, and after the class. Participants representing 10 first languages, varying levels of experience operating in English, and 7 ID degree programmes were recruited via posters and department listservs. All were compensated for their time. After a brief in-person orientation with the researcher, each participant chose whether to complete an oral reflection (n=8) or a written reflection (n=10). To minimize intermediation, reflections were completed independently, although a list of optional prompts was provided. This method was based on the “thinkaloud” process described in Bowles, 2010¹. All reflections were completed during weeks 2-4 of Lent term. Data was analyzed thematically and then shared with interested participants via an optional online group discussion in May. This group helped design the recommendations below.

Key challenges

In addition to the work of understanding and formulating English comments, participants’ experience of language barriers amplified other difficulties (many of which may also affect subgroups of native English speakers). Challenges included:

- Lack of clarity about the purpose and norms of seminar classes, and lack of consistency among seminar leaders’ approaches.
- Difficulty understanding the quick/casual speech of native English speakers in homogenous groups. Other English-language learners of any background were often easier to understand.
- Difficulty jumping into unstructured conversations due to the extra time needed to formulate a comment and the fear of having to answer follow-up questions without time to think.
- Surprise during early Michaelmas term at the steepness of the language learning curve, followed by shame, frustration, and isolation.

Recommendations

The ID Department and other University bodies should:

- **Set expectations during orientation.**
 - Guide all students to reflect on the ways that differing language backgrounds affect seminar dynamics, possibly including video testimony from former students. This creates a foundation for in-class reminders and discussions.
 - Highlight that the skill of communicating across language barriers is vital in ID, and that language challenges are intertwined with the assets of additional language/cultural knowledge.

¹ Bowles, M. (2010). Concurrent Verbal Reports in Second Language Acquisition Research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 30, 111-127. doi:10.1017/S0267190510000036

- **Foster social support for English-language learners.**
 - To reduce any sense of ashamed isolation during Michaelmas, organize an in-department meeting for English-language learners during Week 2, after students have realistically assessed their challenge levels. Guide attendees to share what they are experiencing and how they are coping.
 - Prompt attendees to consider whether they want to meet again later in the term without faculty involvement.
- **Signpost.** Emphasize that LSE Life and Language Centre support is available and powerful.

Seminar leaders should (and should be trained to):

- **Clarify expectations.** Begin the term by explaining how they understand the purpose of seminars, how they approach leading them, and what behaviors they expect. Name and normalize common barriers (eg: jumping in feels awkward, discussion moves on before you are ready to speak, fear of follow-ups). Explain what students can do when they hit these barriers (ex: it's okay to say, "I'd like to go back to that point about X").
- **Mediate conversation.** When the class struggles to engage with an unclear comment, offer some kind of response (eg: restatement, a clarifying question) to validate that person's participation and help the group incorporate it. Offer summaries of presentations or points that might be hard to follow, including those from fast-talking native speakers.
- **Build consistent structures** into each class, rather than relying fully on free-form discussion. Use small groups to build relationships within the seminar and nourish students' confidence in speaking. Consider starting each class with a whiparound of mandatory brief comments.

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