

What are the linguistic and cultural challenges of studying online for second-language English postgraduate students?

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Background and literature review

Our journey at the LSE started with the issue of language and cultural barriers. Arriving straight from French public education institutions, we felt lost in this new system, and the transition was made particularly challenging by the 2020/2021 COVID-19 context. Previous Change Makers research on the difficulties of students completing their first English-language degree (Kohlmann, 2020)ⁱ demonstrated that Second-Language English speakers (SLES) already encountered challenges amplified by language barriers: lack of clear understanding of the purposes and norms of (in-person) seminars, difficulties in 'jumping-in' discussions... More generally, according to the literature on SLES's difficulties, the main challenge faced by 'international students' and SLES is to quickly learn to 'navigate an English-speaking academic environment' (Hong Shi *et. al*, 2017)ⁱⁱ.

Differentiating our project from previous ones, the aim of our study was to analyse SLES difficulties in light of this new online learning context. Would pre-recorded lectures, online seminars, online meetings with peers and faculty reinforce these difficulties, attenuate them, or even create new ones? In the perspective of the LSE 2030 goals for better peer inclusion, we hope that our work will help the LSE community to better integrate students with English difficulties into online classrooms.

Methodology

Our participants:

- All postgraduate students from different LSE Departments.
- Experiencing their first year of study in an anglophone university.
- Different mother tongues: Georgian, Hindi, Mandarin, Spanish, Swahili.

The focus groups and interviews:

- 4 focus groups composed of 7 SLES; 2 interviews of 2 SLES.
- First three focus groups: gathering qualitative data.
- Fourth focus group: a collective reflexive time to work on recommendations.

Data collection chronology:

- Focus group sessions with intervals of minimum 3 weeks.
- Goal: to adopt a 'term-long' approach, to have an overall perspective on the online learning experience during Lent term.

Data analysis

Each focus group revealed new ideas corresponding to different things that students were experiencing at the time— classes, exams, dissertation. Ideas came from the participants themselves, shaping our research into a bottom-up thematic analysis. The challenges that we present in our ‘findings’ were understood by our participants to be associated with four specific online contexts —break-out rooms, pre-recorded lectures, office hours, and online seminars— but some of the challenges are to be connected with several of these contexts. We treated these four specific contexts as categories and the challenges as codes shaping our findings and our recommendations.

Findings

The 2020-2021 academic year saw the emergence and the reinforcement of challenges for SLES:

1. *‘Feeling out of the conversation and ignored; but feeling like I should contribute to the discussion’*. It is exacerbated in the case of break-out rooms, especially when the group is composed of only native English speakers, using fast spoken language, and being people that SLES have never met in person or virtually before, sometimes all from the same programme different from SLES’ own programmes.
2. *‘It is more difficult to ask for clarifications when I am not sure to understand what the teacher just explained’*. It is associated with pre-recorded lectures where there is no possibility for students to ask questions during the lecture, and an additional step is needed to ask for clarifications using emails, office hours, or online seminar sessions where SLES often do not feel very confident to participate. Yet, SLES attenuate this challenge by using the subtitles function from the video platforms used by LSE faculty .
3. *‘Not always feeling sufficiently comfortable to ‘jump in’ the discussion and fully express my own ideas’*. It must be noted that it is already challenging for SLES in-person contexts to ‘jump in’ without raising hands or being asked to. This difficulty comes from past internalised academic habits. Yet, the online context adds a new layer of discomfort to be surpass: the reduced possibilities for non-verbal signs of approval and encouragements due to the ‘headshot’ effect of the video conversation, and the reduced possibilities for engagement with classmates outside of the classroom, make it harder to observe and integrate new behavioral norms indicating how and when it is ok to intervene.
4. *‘The pressure of having a very short window of time to express things that can hardly be discussed otherwise/elsewhere’*. Less ‘informal’ in-person interactions with faculty resulted in more pressure felt by SLES to use office hours efficiently. However, the current system often offers slots that are considered too short (15-20min) for SLES to feel comfortable enough to reformulate their concerns and ask for clarifications if something in the conversation is not entirely understood on both sides. This is a very strong concern for SLES, because they are used to being able to have informal ‘outside of the class’ forms of discussions as part of their learning experience.

Recommendations

1) Working on what already exists

Idea 1: Peer-Support Groups:

Conditions for peer-support group to be a very beneficial tool:

- Structure and expectations must be clearly instructed by the course's teacher.
- Not too demanding in terms of workload: a meeting every two weeks, all year long, included in seminars or lectures (as a dedicated time allocation at the end).
- Can help to reduce their linguistic difficulties in sharing the amount of readings and conversing with natives
- Can create a community of SLES while improving their language abilities

Idea 2: Seminar Preparation Activities:

- Seminar activities handed out before each seminar ⇒ more confidence to engage during in-person/online seminars.
- More visual content in the activities ⇒ good grasp of new concepts in less study time.

Idea 3: Presentations during Seminars:

- Prepare speeches in advance ⇒ a good way to demonstrate critical abilities
- A dedicated 'talking time' ⇒ can speak at own pace and develop ideas in depth
- Respond to questions after the presentation ⇒ feeling empowered and listened to

Idea 4: Encouraging Decolonisation of Academia:

- Not a lot of diversity in course materials ⇒ feeds a feeling of SLES isolation in class debates
- More diverse theoretical traditions in debates, more born and educated SLES faculty members ⇒ more openness to cultural and linguistic diversity in the class

Idea 5: New 'Office Hours' System:

- 20 minutes format ⇒ not enough time for questions, and reformulations linked to linguistic difficulties ⇒ leads to highly stressful situations especially in a fully online context when there are no 'in-person' alternatives.
- Create the opportunity to book several 20 minutes slots in a row ⇒ less stressful, enough time to make sure that guidance and ideas are completely understood by both sides of the conversation

Idea 6: More Language Centre Classes:

- Increase the weekly frequency of & classes, have longer sessions with the teachers ⇒ Have special dedicated time for feedback with the teachers ⇒ can balance participants' greatest challenge of always being unsure of their own progression and skills.

2) **New ideas to implement at the LSE**

Idea 1: Have Separate Social Activities for Online versus on Campus Communities:

- Shared social activities happening online for both communities of remotely-studying people and 'on-campus' people ⇒ unsatisfactory. 'On campus' community is unmotivated by the idea of online activity and the 'online' community is not able to really create a community because of the hybrid nature of hybrid activities.

Idea 2: Organise a 'Week 0' before each Term to Organise Activities around Second-Language English Students challenges (core recommendation of our project) with:

- Workshops for British academia system explanation ⇒ functioning of office hours/ lectures/ seminars; roles of professors, seminars leaders and students; various expectations.
- Sessions for getting to know teachers/ seminar leaders/ peers before classes (even if they are online), in order to identify students with language difficulties and adapt teaching styles.
- Workshops led by SLES or others to speak about the challenges encountered & mentioned here, and suggest guidelines –like the use of verbal or visual communication signs online.

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ⁱ Kohlmann, Mary (2020) 'How do ID MSc students who are completing their first English-language degree encounter and navigate language barriers in LSE seminars?'. LSE Change Makers 2019-2020. Accessible at: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Eden-Centre/Assets-EC/Documents/Change-makers/48-Language-Barriers.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Hong Shi, Jamie Harrison, Daniel Henry (2017) 'Non-native English speakers' experiences with academic course access in a U.S. university setting', *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, Vol. 28, 25-34.