The Cultural and Linguistic Challenges of Studying Online for English Second-Language Students

A project by LSE's 'Change Makers'

Our team

With our participants, and the help of our supervisor and Change Makers team

Nikola Turière

MSc Culture and Conflict in a
Global Europe,
European Institute

Selma Kerroux

MSc Urbanisation and
Development,
Department of Geography and
Environment

Introduction

## 1st part

Origins of the project

Why us? Why this project?
As two non-native English speakers experiencing their first year of studies in an English speaking university, we share and deeply understand the same language and cultural adaptation difficulties than our participants. We felt that our transition to this new academic world was made particularly challenging by the 2020-2021 shift to online learning due to COVID-19.

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

Objective: Analyse how the shift to online classes impacts Second-Language English Speakers (SLES) in the LSE postgraduate community. For example, did it enhance, or not, the challenges encountered in 'in-person' context by SLES?
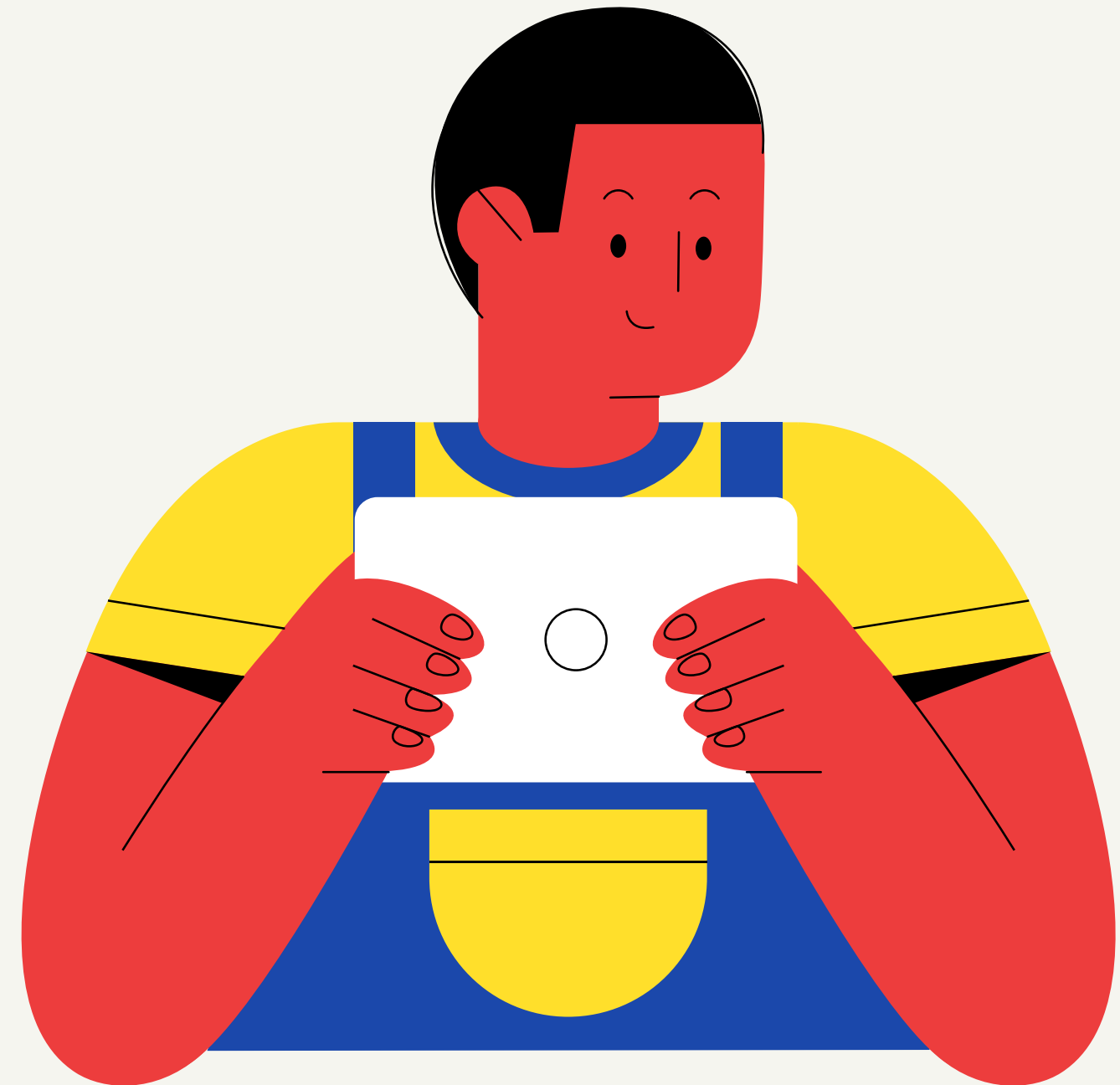
Methods

2nd part

Overview of our methods

- Qualitative data : focus groups and semi-structured interviews

- Participants' profile : all experiencing their first year of study in an anglophone university

- Chronology : a **'term-long'** approach (focus groups set with intervals of three weeks, during Lent Term (March 2021 to June 2021), in order to obtain an overall/ long-term perspective on the topic from the same participants.

- A bottom-up thematic analysis

Focus groups

- Three sessions + One 'reflexivity' session
- 7 participants
- From Colombia, Mexico, India, China, Peru, Austria
- Postgraduates from different LSE Departments

Semi-structured interviews

- 2 interviews
- 2 participants
- From Georgia and Tanzania
- Postgraduates from different LSE Departments

Findings

3rd Part

Break-out Rooms

Online Seminars

Pre-recorded Lectures

Office Hours

'Feeling out of the conversation & ignored; but feeling like I should contribute to the discussion'

Especially:
- in breakout rooms
- with only Natives in the room
- using fast spoken language
- have not met the people before (in-person or virtually)
- class from another department

'It is more difficult to ask for clarifications when I am not sure to understandwhat the teacher just explained'

Especially in pre-recorded lectures
- no possibilities to ask questions during the lecture
- additional steps (as emails or office hours) needed to ask clarifications

But, also has advantages: subtitles; time difference friendly; more preparation time; less intimidating

Break-out Rooms

Online Seminars

Pre-recorded Lectures

Office Hours
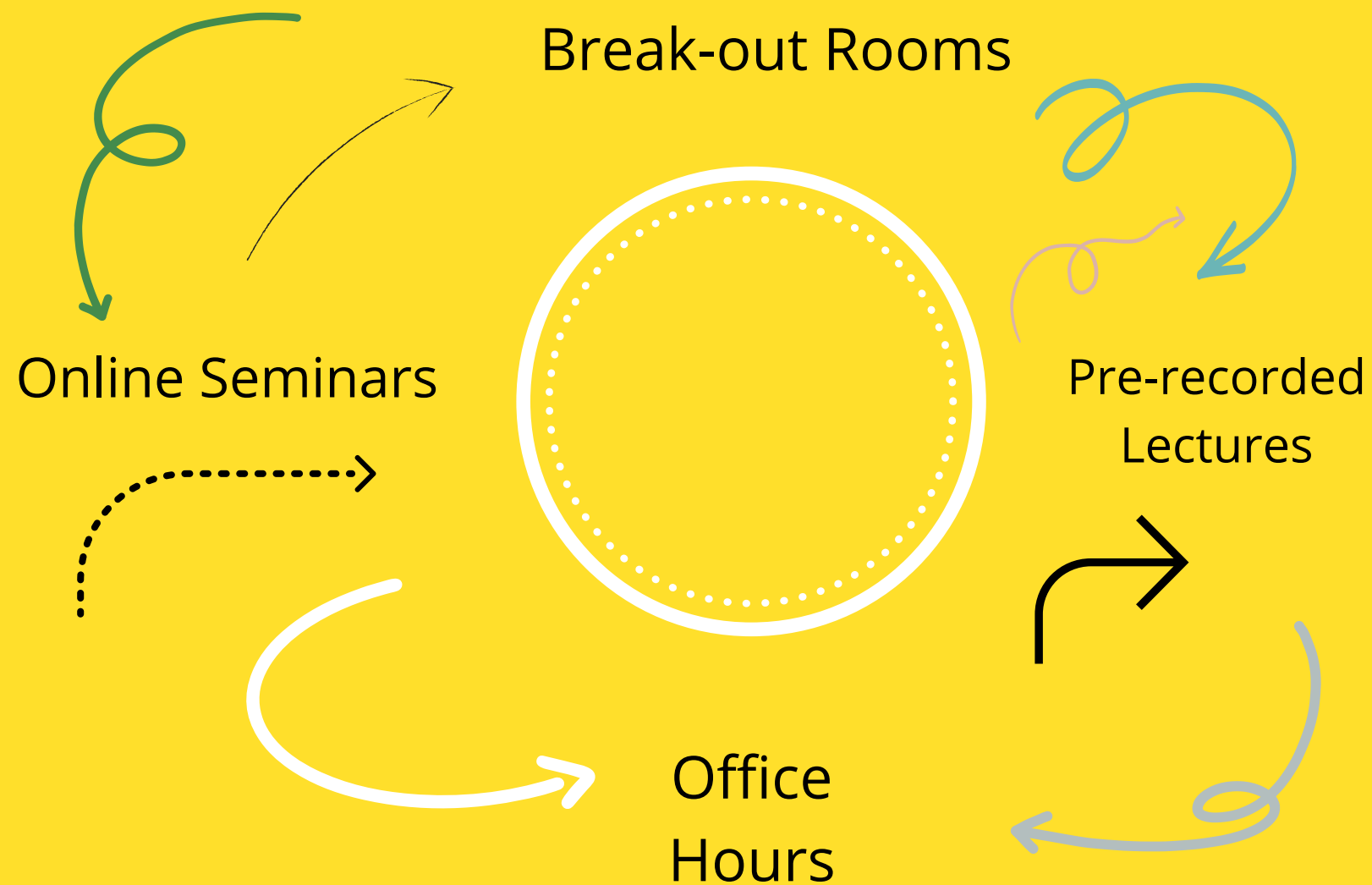
'Not always feeling sufficiently comfortable to ''jump in'' the discussion and fully express my own ideas'

Especially because:
- Already not instinctive for SLES in in-person contexts to 'jump in' without raising hands/being asked to
- Reduced possibilities for non-verbal signs of approval and encouragements
- Reduced possibilities for engagement with classmates outside of the classroom, that would create a more relaxed atmosphere in class and de-construct potential cultural stereotypes barriers
- Harder to integrate social and behavioural norms indicating when it is ok to intervene

'The pressure of having a very short window of time to express things that can hardly be discussed otherwise/elsewhere'

Especially because:
- less 'informal' in-person interactions with faculty ⇒ more pressure to use office hours efficiently
- slots that are very short (15-20min) so not a lot of time to fully reformulate/ask for clarifications if something in the conversation is not 100% understood on both sides
- SLES are used to having 'outside of the class' forms of discussions as part of their learning experience, and at the same time, the format of online office is very different from the type of environments in which interactions with teachers usually took place (a lot more time, a more relaxed atmosphere)
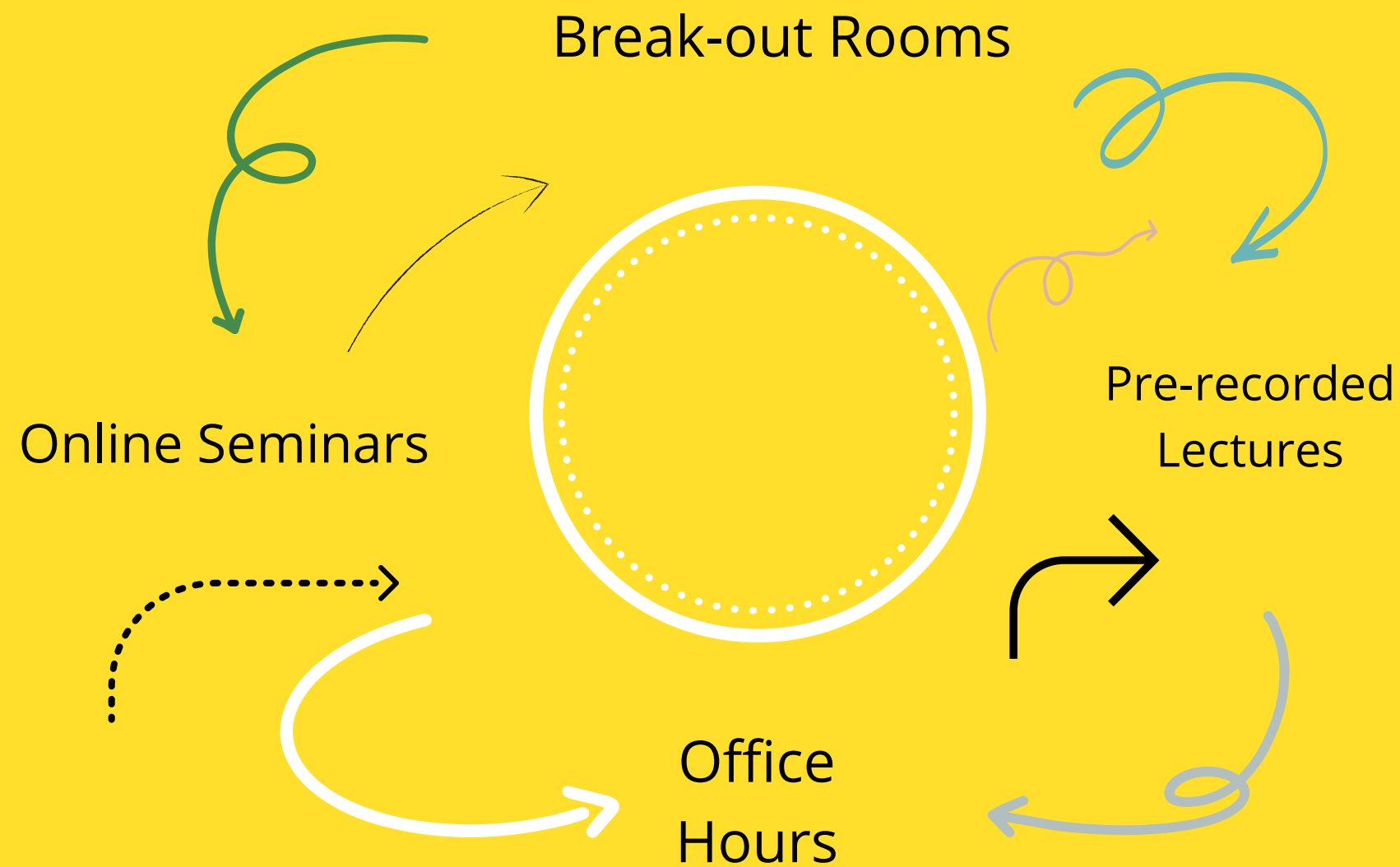
Recommendations

4th part
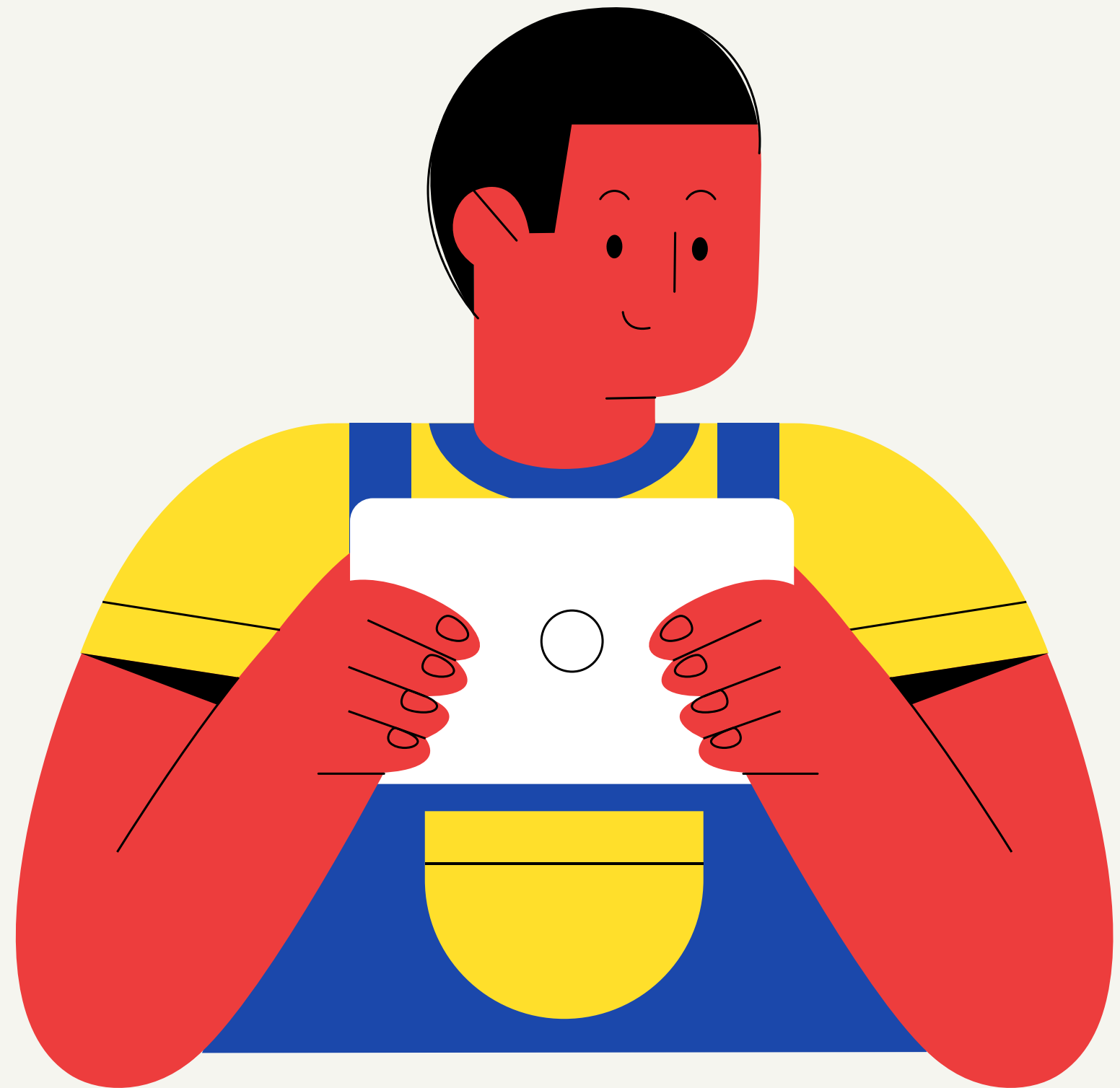
Conditions for the peer-support group to be a beneficial tool :
- Structure and expectations clearly instructed by the course convenor
- Not too demanding in terms of workload: 1 meeting every 2 weeks, all year long
- Sharing the amount of readings ⇒ can help to reduce linguistic difficulties
- Can create a community of SLES while improving language abilities

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Peer-Support Groups

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

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Seminar Prep' Activities

- Prepare speeches in advance ⇒ 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

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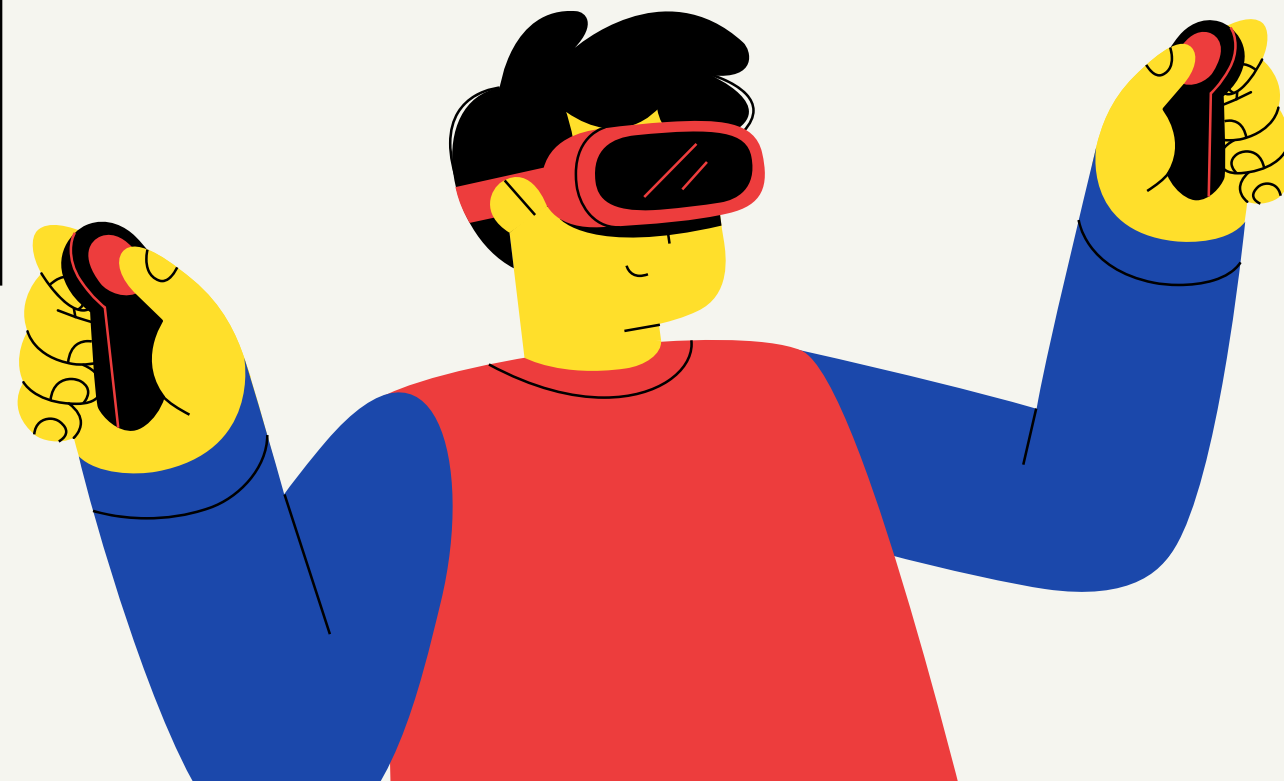
- Not a lot of diversity in course materials ⇒ feeds a feeling of SLES isolation in class debates
- More diverse theoretical traditions in debates, more born and educated SLES faculty members allows more opennes to cultural and linguistic diversity in the class

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Encouraging Decolonisation of Academia

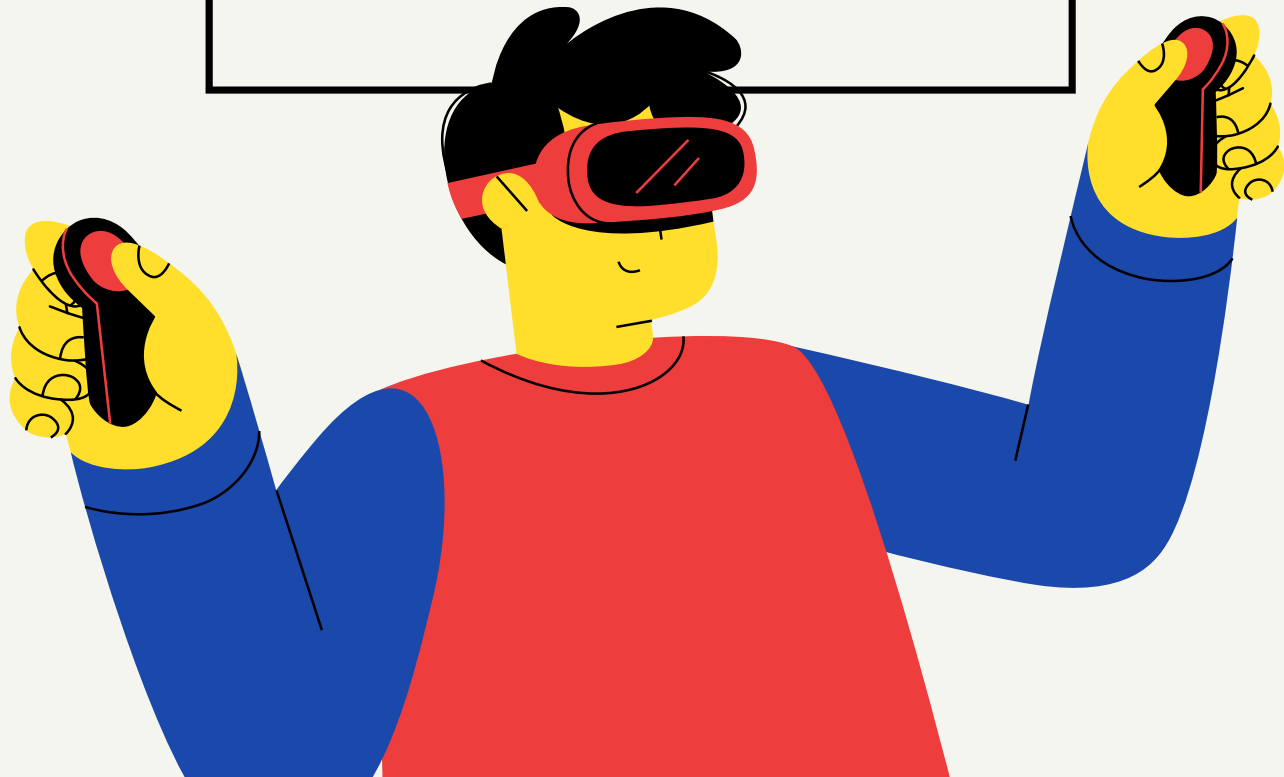- Increase the weekly frequency of classes, have longer sessions with the teachers
- Have special dedicated time for feedback with the teachers ⇒ can balance participants greatest challenge of always being unsure of their own progression and skills

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More Language Center Classes

- 20 minutes format ⇒ not enough for questions and reformulations linked to linguistic difficulties. It leads to highly stressful situations especially in a fully online context when there are not 'in-person' alternatives
- Creates the opportunity to book several 20 minutes slots in a row (less stressful, enough time to make sure that guidance and ideas are completly understood by both sides of the conversation).

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New 'Office Hours' System

- Workshops to explain British academia system (functioning of office hours/ lectures/ semiars + roles of professors, seminar leaders and students + various expectations
- Sessions for getting to know teachers / seminar leaders/ peers before classes(even if 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 and mentioned here and suggest guidlines as the use of verbal or visual communication signs online

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- Shared social activities online for both communities is unsatisfactory
- 'On campus' community is unmotivated by the idea of online activity
- 'Online' community is not able to really create a community because of the hybrid nature of hybrid activities

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Have Separate Social Activities for Online vs 'On Campus' Communities

Organise a 'Week 0' before each Term to Organise Activities around SLES Students Challenge

Thank you very much for your help and your support!

Dr Thalia Magioglou

SUPERVISOR

Dr Ellis Saxey

Dr Lydia Halls

CHANGE MAKERS TEAM

Alison Standring

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE LANGUAGE CENTER

Our participants

LSE POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS