Imposter Syndrome Among LSE Students

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

Background

This research idea stemmed from my observation of different patterns of class participation among LSE students. A classmate expressed that her lack of participation was attributed to her fear of not being good enough in class. While reflecting on her concerns, I too realised that I have had similar thoughts in class. This is a classic sign of imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is described as internalised feelings of incompetency. In the context of universities, it is apparent in forms of pressures like perfectionism, social comparisons and a fear of failure – all of which have the potential to fester, and eventually swell into crippling anxiety. LSE has the reputation of being one of the most prestigious schools in the world. Students who are selected to study in LSE are often known as the crème de la crème among the applicants. It is possible that students experience imposter syndrome due to the expectations imposed on themselves for being in such a prestigious school. This research project focuses on the participation of students in class and whether participation relates to fear of incompetency.

My research question is: *How do students perceive their experiences in class and does this affect their participation?*

The goal of this research is to identify the actions and/or inactions that can be taken to support student experiences in LSE classes which would in turn enhance students' confidence to participate in class.

Methodology

In obtaining my data and addressing the research question, I employed semi-structured interviews. Recruitment was done over messages and advertisements done on students' WhatsApp groups. Friends also relayed the inquiry to potential and interested participants. I conducted semi-structured interviews on 10 LSE students, with diverse levels of study, genders, ethnicities, and background. The questions asked revolved around participants' experiences during class sessions. The questions asked during the interviews explored participants' experiences in classes and their participation.

Analysation of data was done by utilising thematic analysis. Patterns and themes were identified from the interviews. A thematic network analysis was developed from the data collected in the interviews. This is depicted through a thematic map (Figure 1). I was able to identify various themes which I then refined into 3 organising themes.

Findings

The three organizing themes that were deduced from the obtained data were "class setting challenge", "personality challenge" and "language challenge" (See Figure 1).
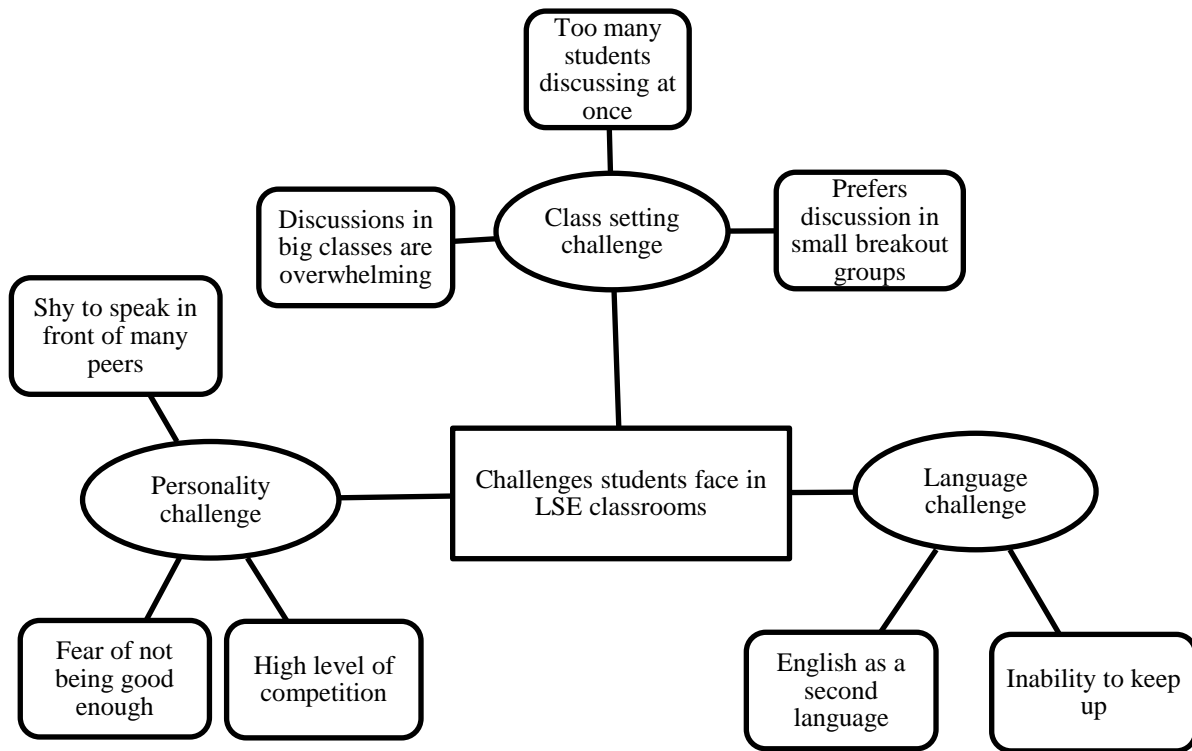

Figure 1

From the interviews, I was able to find that firstly, class settings affect participants' confidence to participate in class. Most students prefer to participate in seminars which are organised in a way where students are broken down into smaller groups to discuss readings and seminar questions. 60% of participants stated that they participate better in smaller groups as opposed to a seminar where the class is discussing as a whole class. This is because participants found it more overwhelming when discussing in a bigger group and they would opt to just keep quiet and listen to other classmates instead.

I also found that 50% of the research participants find themselves scared or shy to speak up as they fear their answers and ideas would not be as good as their peers'. This is where I believe there exists imposter syndrome. Students find that the same classmates tend to "speak too much" and it creates an over competitive environment. I categorised this under the personality

challenge as I believe that students in classrooms can have polarising personalities – some do not participate at all whereas there are others who participate a lot.

The third challenge is the language challenge. 70% of the participants interviewed were non-native-English speakers. Out of these 70%, 100% of them mentioned the language barrier. They assert that certain words used in classes were of a vocabulary beyond their level and they were unable to keep up, consequentially leading to them not participating in class.

From the interviews, I was able to identify that although imposter syndrome is experienced by 50% of the participants, this was not the major contribution to lack of participation in class. It is a result of other challenges such as class setting and the language barrier.

Recommendations

I propose recommendations based on what I believe can be done to mitigate these challenges, coupled with the suggestions that were mentioned by some of the participants during the interviews. These recommendations, if implemented, can encourage higher participation among students and improve the quality of student experiences in LSE.

What can LSE staff and teachers do?

- LSE Staff should encourage lecturers to carry out seminars structured in group discussions - a guide of diverse group seminar activities can be provided for teachers to get ideas on how to conduct their seminars in a more engaging way for students
- Teachers should acknowledge good work of students - Providing students praises and feedback can positively impact those struggling with the fear of not being good enough
- Teachers can "control" participation by suggesting for other students who have not have the chance to talk to participate instead of allowing the same students to talk multiple times
- Teachers can consider using English terms that can cater to students who are not native English speakers - teachers should be able to gauge the level of appropriate vocabulary to use in class teachings
- LSE Staff can require teachers to email students who do not participate at all to check if they are able to keep up with the class and to provide feedback on their participation

What can students do?

- Students should encourage their peers to participate in class by involving encouraging them to talk during group discussions
- Students can acknowledge the limited class time and allow other students the opportunity to participate in discussions
- Students should help their peers struggling with the readings of language barriers by offering help or explanation where they are able to