

Breaking Barriers and Boosting Engagement: What Limits Access and Engagement with Peer-Led Language Learning at LSE Language Centre?

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See this report presented by the researchers: https://youtu.be/j_UTB0IWxiY?t=1307

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In today's interconnected world, speaking different languages is crucial to broaden professional opportunities and to erase boundaries between each other. One of the most appealing features of the LSE is the diversity of the members of its community that come from over 140 countries. Along with the better-known paid language courses, the LSE Language Centre (LSE-LC) offers free peer-led language learning opportunities open to the whole LSE community and led by student volunteers. There are three free services on offer: conversation circles, tandem learning and bitesize speaking.

The combination of a linguistically diverse environment with an increasing importance of language skills in the labour market and a mobile population would lead us to expect a high demand for these services. However, figures show rather limited number of users and available languages. Thus, the question arises: what factors are constraining the access to and engagement with the peer-led Language Centre's free resources? To shed light on this matter, between the months of March and April 2023 we conducted an online survey among LSE students, faculty members and professional services staff (PSS) to evaluate the access to and engagement with peer-led language learning services.

Two key findings were identified that could inform LSE-LC efforts in the future. First, raising awareness of the existence of the free learning services seems paramount: 40% of the respondents reported not having heard of them before. Second, service users report very low levels of engagement, the majority of them stopped attending after just one session.

Key findings

- The vast majority of the LSE community (96%) wants to improve or learn foreign languages during their time at LSE.
- The lack of awareness of the free services is the main barrier to access to the services. While awareness of the existence of the LSE-LC is very high (93%), the free services are largely unknown: 40% of respondents have never heard of them, while if we control for the LSE-LC population (i.e.: people who received the invitation to the survey via the LSE-LC or its volunteers), this figure jumps to 67%.
- Even when people report awareness of the services, a significant percentage of respondents (25%) thought they were not eligible to benefit from them.
- Engagement levels are a major issue: almost 80% and 90% of people leave two of these free services after only attending one session.
- Conversation circles and tandem learning users are largely satisfied (85% and 90%, respectively), while this percentage drops substantially for bitesize sessions (35%).

Main policy recommendations

- To address the main entry barrier (lack of awareness of free services), LSE-LC communication and promotion strategies need to be reviewed.
- To address low levels of engagement, the collection of direct feedback from users after their sessions, as well as more direct monitoring, is advisable.

Section I: Key findings

1.1 General findings

First, the vast majority of respondents (96%) are interested or have been interested to learn or improve their knowledge of a foreign language during their time at the LSE, either for professional reasons or as a hobby. While 85% of respondents deem being able to communicate in a foreign language relevant for their professional development, half of respondents consider it to be “extremely relevant” for such purpose. However, these high figures are in stark contrast with the high percentage of respondents (47%) that were not engaged in any type of activity directed towards improving skills in a foreign language.

Second, while knowledge about the existence of the LSE-LC is quite high – only 7% of respondents report unawareness – respondents are much less aware of the free services on offer. Namely, 40% of participants have never heard about the free language services. This figure raises to 67% if we exclude the answers given by the ‘LSE-LC population’ (that is, respondents that accessed the survey via an email received by the LSE-LC, its Moodle page, or its volunteers). This distinction is important as those who were recruited via these means are likely to be involved in the LSE-LC activities and therefore more aware of their services compared to people not directly involved in the LSE-LC sphere, as data proves. Conducting a desegregated analysis, undergraduate students are much more likely to know about these free services (88%), while PSS and postgraduate students are the categories that are the most unaware (49% and 43% respectively). The best-known resource are conversation circles, while tandem learning stands out as the one people is less aware of. Regarding communication channels, most people came to know peer-led services via their LSE email account (38%), followed by the LSE Language Community on Moodle (13%), the LSE-LC and LSE websites (11%), and word of mouth (9%). It appears, therefore, that LSE official communication channels are very relevant.

Thirdly, whereas we would have expected a high level of enrolment from the people that confirmed that they knew at least about one of the free services, this is not the case. On the contrary, most of them have never tried them (73%). The results are in stark contrast with respondents systematically reporting costs as the most relevant factor that they consider when looking for a service/resource to learn a language. Another important factor was the convenience of timetable. In any case, among those who never used the services, reported causes of non-enrolment are very diverse. However, lack of time was outlined as a major issue. Moreover, a significant percentage of people (25%) stated that, although they were aware of the services, they believed that they were not eligible to benefit from them for some reason.

Finally, among those who tried the services, most people had enrolled in conversation circles sessions (55.1%), whereas 22.45% joined tandem learning and bitesize speaking respectively. However, the survey unveiled a significant engagement problem in all cases and specially in relation to tandem learning and bitesize speaking, which almost 80% and 90% of respondents stopped attending after their first session. The same problem appears in relation to conversation circles for almost 50% of respondents. Again, in these cases the main problem for further engagement relates to lack of time (47%), followed by timetable suitability (17%) and a lack of suitable levels on offer (12%). None of the respondents

reported dissatisfaction with the volunteer leading the session as a reason for no further engagement.

1.2 Main findings per service

Conversation circles are sessions in which the volunteer leader proposes various activities and topics to practise primarily speaking skills with groups of a maximum of 10-15 people. For a sample of 27 people who attended at least one session, the majority reported satisfaction with the quality of the services (85%). The same percentage of users would recommend the services to a friend. There has not been found any particular aspect of these circles that are highly disliked by participants, while they particularly appreciated the registration method via Moodle, the flexibility of sign up on a weekly basis and the quality of the volunteers that lead the sessions. Regarding potential improvements, some would welcome changes in the context and/or structure of the learning sessions (9 participants), whereas others highlight that such sessions should be more and better promoted (6 participants). Furthermore, among all the participants (not only the users of the service), the majority is satisfied or very satisfied (40% and 22.5% respectively) with the languages and levels on offer for the conversation circles. However, 83 out of 227 respondents proposed new languages or levels that they would like to see available: Italian (18 proposals), followed by Japanese (9) and Arabic (6) were the most suggested. Moreover, respondents highlighted the desire to see more A1/A2 levels in the languages on offer to have the opportunity to start learning a language and not only to practice those for which some knowledge has been already acquired. There was also demand to increase the offer of French levels (7).

Tandem learning results when there are two people with complementary language preferences, with one being able to teach the language in which the other is interested, and vice versa. For a sample of 11 users that have attended at least one of the sessions, the level of satisfaction and the probability of recommending the services to a friend are also very high: 10 out of 11 in both cases. We found no aspect that was disliked by a significant percentage of users. In relation to potential improvements that could be implemented, once again the most common recommendations were related to improving or expanding the awareness of the services.

Finally, **bitesize sessions** are services in which language learners can have a 1-to-1 meeting with their language volunteer, deciding which points they want to work on, or solve specific doubts. For a sample of 11 people that had attended at least one of the sessions, the results differ from the previous two cases. Namely, the level of satisfaction worsens: only 36% of respondents were satisfied with the services (45% of respondents stated that they were not satisfied nor dissatisfied, while 18% are dissatisfied). Despite these results, most users would still recommend the services to a friend (63%).

Section II: Methodological notes

The findings are derived from an online survey conducted between the 21st of March and the 30th of April 2023 among 227 participants. Most respondents are postgraduate students (134); however, replies were also obtained from undergraduate students (49), PhD students (6), faculty members (3) and PSS (35). Respondents come from a wide variety of departments at the LSE – health policy, public policy, economics, economic history,

mathematics, geography, anthropology, sociology, government, or philosophy –. There was a particular strong representation of the European Institute (50) among respondents, as we are fellow students from its MSc in Political Economy of Europe. Several recruitment strategies were followed. The most successful ones were: email sent by the LSE-LC (87 respondents), informal student WhatsApp groups (54), survey dissemination via LSE departments (30) and advertisement through LSE staff news (19).

Section III: Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations are proposed to enhance access and engagement levels vis-à-vis the free peer-led language resources.

- Firstly, to address the main access barrier identified to the services (lack of awareness of the existing services on offer), the communication strategies of the LSE-LC should be carefully reconsidered. Namely, the LSE-LC could consider increasing the advertising level of these resources and highlight the fact that they are free and open to the whole LSE community, and particularly targeting PSS and postgraduate students. Moreover, the LSE-LC could diversify its diffusion channels and design bespoke strategies for each service.
- Secondly, the other major issue identified has been the lack of engagement from the side of the users of the services. To improve such low levels, we advise gathering direct and regular feedback from the service users, to adopt necessary measures. This seems particularly relevant in the case of Bitesize sessions.