

Exploring the Impact of Language Barrier on Academic Performance: A Case Study of Postgraduate International Students in the European Institute

Lucia Sánchez Cabanillas

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Introduction

This project aims to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of international students to shed light on the challenges faced by non-native students and how these obstacles can be addressed by the LSE to create a more inclusive learning environment.

This project focuses on investigating the impact of language barriers on student grades and overall performance. To do this, I will first present the research methods that I have used to conduct the study. Second, I will present the findings along with some specific examples and then I will specify some recommendations to tackle the problem.

Research Method & Findings

This study focuses on postgraduate students within the European Institute (EI). Given that 88% of the students in this department are international, this issue holds particular significance. Two focus groups of 10 people each were conducted, making the sample size 9% of EI students. The questions raised in the focus groups were either problem focused, to understand the problem of language barrier, or solution focused, to elicit recommendations from participants on how to overcome the language barrier.

The findings can be separated in four main topics:

- 1. Difficulties with academic writing:** Language barriers can make it challenging for international students to grasp the cultural norms and expectations of essay writing in a British university setting. They may encounter difficulties in structuring their essays, expressing their ideas effectively, and adhering to academic conventions. This can lead to lower grades and a lack of confidence in their writing abilities. Focus group participants claimed to spend twice the time in writing an essay due to the language barrier. These are some examples of student's experiences:

Q- Have you ever felt that the language barriers have impacted your grades?

A - "100% yes. In the previous system where I studied, we are not used to write essays. Most of our exams here are written and I always struggle with finding the right words in

the writing process and making it academic. So, for me I am sure this has played a major role.”

- 2. Challenges with seminar participation:** Language barriers can contribute to feelings of anxiety, self-consciousness, and difficulty understanding questions or following the pace of the discussion. Students found themselves wanting to ask a question but not feeling confident enough to do so. Students also expressed that sometimes they would write the questions down before asking them, but they felt like that hindered their ability to truly listen to people’s interventions because they were thinking in what they were going to say. They felt like conveying their message was harder and sometimes they even felt “Stupid” talking.

Q- Have you ever avoided participating in a seminar because of language barriers?

A- “In my case I think I have abstained from participating because basically it's quite hard to express ideas in the same complexity as you would like to do in your mother tongue so sometimes, you're just not motivated enough to say something that would be just too simple”

- 3. Comprehension challenges in lectures:** Language barriers can exacerbate the problem when students struggle to catch every word spoken by the professor. The acoustics of the room and the professor's speaking volume and clarity can significantly impact comprehension. Moreover, the lack of visual aids in certain lectures exacerbates the difficulties students may experience.

Q- Have you ever experienced difficulty understanding lectures or seminars due to language barriers?

A- “There are rooms where you can hear better, when they use the microphone, it helps me follow the lectures way better. You can hear them without it but it is helpful if they do”

- 4. Limited opportunities for peer support and feedback:** Students felt like they were not getting enough feedback opportunities in terms of their academic work but also on their language skills and writing skills. Here is a quote for when students voiced the lack of language related feedback and peer support.

A- “reading my native speaker friends’ essay helped me a lot to pick up words that I didn’t know. Or for example, teachers could take the best formative essay and if the student agrees share it with the rest so everyone can see what works and what doesn’t.”

Recommendations

Some of the recommendations I am putting forward based on ideas students themselves said could be useful are:

- 1. Enhancing Academic Writing Skills:** Workshops aimed at enhancing academic writing skills, which delve into the nuances of the British essay structure, will provide international student with a valuable opportunity to gain insights into the cultural norms and expectations that shape academic writing. I am aware that LSE provides some workshops in academic writing from the language center, but none of the students knew that this was a possibility. LSE should make a collaborative effort along LSE Life and the Language Centre to better communicate any existing help.
- 2. Emphasize a safe and inclusive environment:** Some of the students expressed that they felt more encouraged to talk in certain situations. For example, when: The teaching staff is international, they get along with their peers in their seminars, teacher reassured students and made them feel like making mistakes is alright. Students expressed a need for more preparation time in class, supportive encouragement, and gentle facilitation from teachers to create a safe and inclusive environment that promotes active participation. By offering students the opportunity to think and prepare their responses, proposing questions in a supportive manner, and providing constructive feedback on their presentations, teachers can help alleviate these barriers and foster an inclusive learning environment where all students feel valued and comfortable expressing their thoughts.
- 3. Improving the understanding of lectures during contact hours:** Implementing practical solutions such as using microphones or other audio-enhancing technologies can greatly improve the auditory experience for international students, ensuring that they have equal access to lecture content and can fully engage with the material being taught. Furthermore, LSE should consider introducing caption in live or recorded lectures as this feature is already available to students with diverse hearing needs, this could be implemented in lectures to improve the complete understanding of the lectures and make sure that no students get left behind.
- 4. Implementing Comprehensive Feedback Mechanisms:** I propose that for formative feedback, instead of receiving an email were each teacher answer one different thing. They fill out an official feedback form (some teachers already do this) and provide a section of written communication where they can discuss any issues, they observed in terms of language skills. If this is not feasible, LSE could start providing standardized training sessions to teaching staff so the department can assure that the students always receive quality feedback not only on their work but also on their ability to convey any message. Moreover, students communicated that they would like more feedback on their oral presentations, not only regarding the concepts but also in the oral communication aspect as this is a key soft skill that they will need in the future, and they would like to improve it throughout their academic careers.
- 5. Establishing Collaborative Learning Communities:** Offer essay review and correction services as part of the LSE Life services to ensure that international students are meeting the expectations of their professors and the university. LSE and the EI in this case, could promote engaging in peer-to-peer interactions, such as sharing formative essays, reading each other's work, and providing feedback,

can be immensely beneficial for improving writing skills and gaining different perspectives. Establishing a mentoring program where students can proofread each other's essays and engage in collaborative learning can create a supportive community that fosters growth and development.

Concluding remarks

This project aims to shed light on the challenges faced by non-native students. By addressing these obstacles, we can create a more inclusive learning environment at LSE. The study has found that language barriers in academia hinder academic writing, seminar participation, lecture comprehension, and that the EI experiences a lack of peer support and feedback regarding language skills for international students. The proposed recommendations are accompanied with more specific course of action that are crucial to support international students, promote academic success, and improve the educational experience. This project serves as a call to action, urging the university to prioritize the needs of international students and take concrete steps to mitigate the impact of language barriers. By doing so, LSE can create a more inclusive and supportive environment, where all students, regardless of their language background, can fully engage, excel, and contribute to the academic community.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, William Mitchell, for his invaluable guidance throughout this research. I would also like to thank the dedicated staff at EI for their support and resources. Additionally, I extend my appreciation to the changemakers who made this research possible. Thank you all for your contributions and for making this journey so enlightening.