

Exploring Communication Challenges of International Students in English-Medium Instruction Contexts

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Abstract

English-Medium of Instruction settings are increasingly prevalent in universities, attracting international students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Language barriers, cultural differences, and underlying structures within the academic context can lead to communication challenges for international students. Much of the existing literature has explored challenges faced by relatively homogenous student groups studying in Anglophone countries, creating a gap in the literature. This research aims to expand frameworks by exploring communication challenges faced by international students studying in non-Anglophone EMI university settings in the Netherlands. This study adopted a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews in order to gain a more in-depth insight of international students' experiences. Key findings indicate that the frequent use of the local language not only affects international students' ability to effectively communicate, but also impacts their sense of inclusion and integration in the host country. The study emphasises the need for more inclusive institutional practices and mutual effort from local and international students to foster an environment suitable for inclusive and open communication.

Keywords: English medium instruction (EMI), communication challenges, international students, language barriers, cultural differences

Introduction

International students studying in English-medium of instruction (EMI) settings may face communication challenges that can emerge from a range of interacting factors, including, but not limited to, linguistic or cultural differences. The growing body of research has explored how factors such as language use, cultural norms, and institutional practices might shape the communicative experiences of international students, yet much of this work has focused on Anglophone contexts and relatively homogenous student groups. The present study aims to expand this body of knowledge by exploring how these challenges are experienced by international students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in a non-Anglophone context, specifically the Netherlands. The Netherlands was selected primarily due to accessibility, but also due the prevalence of international academic settings, making it a fitting environment for this study. Using a qualitative research approach based on semi-structured interviews and thematic framework analysis, the study seeks to address the following research question: To what extent do international students face communication challenges in an EMI university setting? The study aims to contribute to the body of research by expanding existing frameworks of international student communication by examining how students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in a non-Anglophone country experience language use and cultural differences. The study also aims to provide practical insights into how language use, cultural norms, and institutional practices affect international students' communication experiences and integration into the host country. Such insights can contribute to the formation of more inclusive university policies, facilitate better integration and support the development of effective intercultural communication strategies.

Cultural Differences and Communication Challenges

Cultural differences can influence cross-cultural communication and can lead to misunderstandings when messages are interpreted based on varying expectations of implicit or explicit communication (Hall, 1976; Shirahata, 2023; Xiao, 2021). Hall (1976) emphasised the importance of the communication context as it significantly shapes how individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds interpret and understand messages. He distinguished between high- and low-context cultures, focusing on how much meaning is conveyed implicitly through context versus explicitly through direct communication. In high-context cultures, information needed to interpret a message is available in the context, like body language and tone, rather than in the explicit words uttered. In low-context cultures this is the opposite, as the information is conveyed through explicit, direct communication. This distinction suggests that international students from high-context backgrounds might encounter communication difficulties in low-context settings, where direct and explicit communication is the norm. Within the context of EMI settings in the Netherlands, which often favours direct communication, reflecting low-context communication norms, this cultural difference may contribute to misunderstandings among students from high-context cultures who might rely heavily on contextual and non-verbal cues. These challenges could hinder international students' academic and social integration in the host country (Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Tran & Vu, 2016). Hall's (1976) framework thus provides a useful starting point for exploring why international students may experience communication challenges in EMI contexts, as it emphasises that different cultural norms and expectations can affect interpersonal understanding.

These culturally influenced communication styles do not exist in isolation, rather they interact with the perceptions and expectations of host culture students and university staff. When host culture students and staff interpret and understand behaviour and communication

through their own cultural lenses, international students may be misunderstood or even unfairly judged, which could create additional challenges in their communication experiences. Xiao's (2021) study of Chinese international students attending a Canadian university suggests this, as behaviours such as silence or indirect communication were perceived as a lack of engagement when interpreted through a Western cultural lens. These perceptions may stem from differing cultural norms surrounding classroom participation, where the Western expectation is often that of active, verbal participation (Xiao, 2021). These varying communication styles, shaped by one's cultural background, can become visible in classroom settings. For instance, in group work students from high-context cultures may hesitate to state their opinions directly, which can be misinterpreted as disinterest or lack of preparation by local students accustomed to more explicit verbal communication. Similarly, reluctance to interrupt or challenge peers during classroom interactions may be interpreted as passivity or disengagement. As a result, international students may face unfair judgements and communication difficulties, as their behaviour and communication is interpreted through a different cultural lens.

Beyond misinterpretations of behaviour and messages due to differing communication styles, limited cultural understanding can also contribute to stereotyping, which further shapes how international students are perceived in academic settings. When cultural differences are not well understood, students may be assigned generalised attributes that could lead to unfair assumptions that do not reflect their actual identities or intentions (Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Tran & Vu, 2016). Stereotypes can be defined as "person perception schemas of a particular group of people" (Ruble & Zhang, 2013, p. 203). Categorising people is a normal human process that allows people to make sense of the world around them (Ruble & Zhang, 2013), but it can be problematic as it may lead to biased assumptions. These assumptions can influence how international students are perceived, but also how their

communication is interpreted and responded to within academic settings. Ruble and Zhang (2013) suggest that international students may face stereotypes associated with their country of origin, as their study found that Americans associate Chinese international students with stereotypes such as intelligence and diligence, but also with negative perceptions, such as limited English proficiency and not being well-assimilated. Such stereotypes can be harmful, particularly in communicative contexts, as these expectations may subconsciously make local students and staff biased toward international students, possibly making them less inclined to engage in conversation.

These unconscious assumptions could stem from a broader lack of cultural awareness, which not only contributes to the unfair stereotyping of international students, but it also affects how international students are able to communicate and build meaningful relationships with local students. (Kim & Tatar, 2017; Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Xiao, 2021). Many international students report feelings of alienation and social isolation, often because they sense that their communication styles or behaviours are misunderstood (Karuppan & Barari, 2011). Ultimately, this can contribute to the lack of student engagement, as fear of being misunderstood may cause international students to feel uncomfortable expressing themselves in communication with local students. Research by Kim and Tatar (2017) suggests that host students are sometimes unwilling to collaborate with international students because of stereotypes. These findings highlight how cultural differences and a lack of understanding may contribute to the communication challenges experienced by international students in EMI contexts. Increasing cultural awareness appears to be crucial in fostering more inclusive academic environments and social situations, which may enable international students to communicate effectively, engage academically, and form meaningful social relationships.

Language Barriers and Communication Challenges

Language-related barriers can be a source of communication challenges for international students in EMI environments. In non-Anglophone contexts, although English serves as the medium of instruction, the influence of the local language can complicate the communication experiences both within and outside of the classroom. Lan's (2022) study explored international students' perceptions of multilingual English-medium of instruction classrooms, describing the challenges of multilingual classroom settings. International students expressed difficulties with the use of the local language, as a lack of proficiency in the local language contributed to communication difficulties, as well as leading to feelings of exclusion (Lan, 2022). These challenges might be particularly evident in cases of group work or casual interactions, where local students may switch to their local language. As a result, international students may face a complex linguistic challenge, having to navigate academic learning in English, as well as navigating social life in a local language they do not speak, which can hinder their ability to communicate effectively and establish relationships with local students. By focusing on multilingual EMI classroom settings, Lan (2022) contributes to a limited body of work that examines how the use of local languages alongside English shapes international students' communication experiences.

In addition to challenges related to the local language, international students can experience difficulties with English proficiency, particularly in academic contexts. Zhang and Mi (2010) explored language challenges faced by international students by interviewing 40 Chinese students at eight Australian universities. Their study suggests that problems experienced by international students were often related to insufficient command of the English language, such as difficulties in understanding spoken English, problems in written work, and challenges in communication with staff and peers (Zhang & Mi, 2010). These

difficulties may also lead to reduced confidence and a reluctance to engage, both academically and socially (Karuppan & Barari, 2011). Communicating in a second language with limited fluency can hinder international students' ability to express their ideas with clarity and confidence. Consequently, international students might be reluctant to fully participate in class discussions or group work, which can make it harder to connect with local students and communicate effectively. Although proficiency tests such as the IELTS are used to evaluate students' English skills, questions remain as to whether these tests truly accurately reflect the communicative demands of EMI settings (Xiao, 2021, Zhang & Mi, 2010). Furthermore, universities often prioritise writing and reading over oral skills, despite the crucial role that spoken interactions plays both within and beyond classroom settings (Zhang & Mi, 2010).

Although these language barriers may be challenging during the early stages of adjustment, they can gradually be overcome through practice and exposure (Zhang & Mi, 2010). Zhang and Mi (2010) observed that international students' difficulties with listening and speaking in English diminished after two years. This is in line with findings by Yu and Peters (2019), who found that language barriers were most intense when international students first arrived in their host country but found improving their language proficiency quite straightforward, as they could identify opportunities to practice. While difficulties related to English proficiency have been widely examined, challenges stemming from local language use in EMI settings remain comparatively unexplored in the literature. Although Lan's (2022) study provided insights into the exclusionary effects of the local language, there is limited empirical insight into how international students might navigate or overcome these barriers over time. It appears that the role of the local language in shaping international students' communication experiences may need further investigation, particularly with regard

to the long-term challenges and adjustment to the use of local language in international academic settings.

Framing the Academic Context

Understanding the context in which communication takes place is essential when examining the challenges that international students in academic settings may face.

Communication is not only affected by cultural and linguistic differences, but also by the broader academic setting, which is influenced by underlying language ideologies, language practices of university staff, and the policies that structure English-medium of instruction contexts (Dong et al., 2025; Hillman et al., 2021; Lan, 2022; Shirahata, 2023; Xiao, 2021).

Language Ideologies

International academic settings are often influenced by language ideologies, which refer to the underlying beliefs people have about a language and its speakers. These beliefs shape how people think language should be used, and how speakers of a language are perceived based on the way they speak (Lan, 2022; Shirahata, 2023). In Anglophone international contexts, monolingual language ideologies, which prioritise standardised English, are often favoured (Bodis, 2021). This can lead to the exclusion of other languages and can negatively affect international students' engagement and experience, especially when students are pressured to adapt to native-like pronunciation (Xiao, 2021). Although this language ideology may be most prevalent in Anglophone countries, it is unlikely to be as common in non-Anglophone countries due to the presence of the local language. In contrast, English as a lingua franca (ELF) ideologies view English as a shared communicative medium among speakers of different first languages. This ideology encourages the valuation of various forms of English, not just the standardised variety, promoting inclusivity (Dong et al., 2025). International students in international contexts often favour ELF approaches for their inclusivity, although native-speaker privilege can still create social hierarchies (Dong et al.,

2025; Shirahata, 2023). Multilingual ideologies advocate for the coexistence of multiple languages in communicative settings, emphasising the benefits of linguistic diversity (Dong et al., 2025). Views on multilingualism in EMI settings are divided, as some students favour the use of multiple languages, while others, particularly those with limited proficiency in the local language, feel excluded by it (Dong et al., 2025; Hillman et al., 2021). Overall, these language ideologies can significantly impact the experiences of international students, shaping their identity, sense of inclusion and academic engagement in EMI environments (Dong et al., 2025).

Local Language Use in the Classroom

In English-medium of instruction settings, language use by professors can significantly shape international students' classroom experiences (Dong et al., 2025; Kim & Tatar, 2017; Lan, 2022). Finding a balance between the use of the local language and maintaining an inclusive English-speaking environment can be quite challenging (Dong et al., 2025). Multiple studies show that, although English is the default language, teachers often employ the local language to ensure comprehension for local students, thereby unintentionally disadvantaging international students. (Dong et al., 2025; Kim & Tatar, 2017; Lan, 2022). Lan (2022) found that international students expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of local language used in the classroom, as instructors often did not translate key content into English. International students felt that the use of the local language neglected their needs and unfairly advantaged local students (Lan, 2022). For instance, during lectures, instructors might switch to the local language to explain complex content or answer questions, without providing an English translation. This may cause international students to feel excluded or disadvantaged, as they are unable to follow the discussion and access key course content. To ensure inclusivity for both host country students and international

students, institutions should consider these challenges, ensuring that language use practices align across courses.

Language Policies and Linguistic Inclusion

International academic contexts are tasked with creating a language policy that considers the linguistic diversity of its students. While many universities have adopted English as the medium of instruction to attract international students, language planning and linguistic challenges may sometimes be overlooked, which can lead to policies that do not meet students' linguistic and social needs. This could cause challenges related to student inclusion and academic experiences (Dong et al., 2025). Policies might underestimate the impact of the local language and fail to clearly define its role alongside English. Defining the role of the local language can be complex, as it can benefit students proficient in the local language, yet it can also exclude students who do not speak the language (Dont et al., 2025; Lan, 2022). Although many international students seem to accept some use of the local language, many express frustration when translations into English are lacking, creating gaps in content knowledge and a sense of exclusion (Lan, 2022). These policy flaws may contribute to communication barriers and fail to support the diverse linguistic needs of international students in EMI settings.

Methodology

Participants

A total of ten respondents with a mean age of 21.5 took part in the study. Seven participants were female and three were male. The sample included students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds from Aruba, Bosnia-Herzegovina, China, Egypt, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, and Ukraine. The participants followed a variety of bachelor degree programmes, with the majority following International Business Communication (70%), Automotive Engineering (10%), Molecular Life Sciences (10%), and Chemistry (10%). The participants were selected in one of two ways: 1) they were approached directly by the researcher and asked to participate in the study, or 2) they contacted the researcher after seeing a recruitment poster on campus.

Data Collection and Procedure

The current study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of international students' communication challenges in EMI settings. Semi-structured interviews were selected as they are open-ended, allowing for flexibility, yet also following a predetermined thematic framework. This allowed for a broader scope and follow-up questions while remaining within the bounds of the theoretical framework. The initial interview questions consisted of 14 questions, with five demographic questions and nine topic-related questions. The interview questions were revised after the first interview, in consultation with the supervisor, as it was agreed several questions could be clarified or divided into separate questions. The interview topics however remained the same. Following the revision, the interview consisted of a total of 16 questions, with five demographic questions and 11 topic-related questions. Interview topics included:

1. Overall Experience as International Student

One question explored what the overall experience as an international student was like. This question was broad and allowed the participant to discuss the experience in their own words, sharing the positives and negatives of student life in a foreign country.

2. Cultural Differences

Four questions investigated what cultural differences, if any, international students have experienced and how this has affected their communication. These questions explored cultural contrasts, stereotypes, and how this affected their ability to connect with others.

3. Language Barriers

Three questions explored what language barriers, if any, international students encountered and how this affected their communication. These questions considered language proficiency, use of the local language, and how this impacted their sense of inclusion and effective communication.

4. Improving Communication

Three questions explored international students' views on what the university, host country students and professors could change to improve intercultural communication. This question was broad and allowed the participant to share their views and ideas.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus or online via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 20 minutes. During the interview the 16 predetermined questions were used (Appendix A) and the researcher asked follow-up questions when necessary. Participants were provided with an informed consent form before partaking in the study. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed manually. Participants were given a codename to ensure anonymity: Participant one was IS1 and so on.

Coding and Analysing

The thematic analysis of the data was performed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic model, which provides a systematic framework for identifying and organising patterns of meaning across qualitative data. In the first phase the researcher familiarised herself with the data by listening to audio recordings, reading through the transcriptions, and taking notes. In the second phase, initial codes were generated to capture key features relevant to the research question. Following the initial coding phase, in phase three the codes were reviewed to identify areas of similarity and overlap. In phase four the emerging themes were refined and evaluated for coherence and distinctiveness. Once the four main themes had emerged, they were defined and named, and subthemes were identified. Lastly, the analysis was written up into a coherent narrative, supported by illustrative quotes from the data.

Accountability and Reliability

As previously mentioned, all data were coded and analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2012) framework. After the initial coding was completed by the researcher, all coded data was discussed with a second coder to ensure reliability. If coders disagreed on how a segment was coded, the coders discussed this until agreeing upon a final code. All the themes and subthemes were discussed with the second coder, until it was agreed upon what should be considered a theme or subtheme.

Ethical Considerations

The design of this study followed the guidelines of the Ethics Assessment Committee of the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw consent at any time without consequences. All participants signed an information (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C) agreeing to participate in the study. The collected data was treated confidentially and ensured the

anonymity of the participants. Audio recordings of the interview were only made after explicit consent was obtained. The data will be stored securely according to Radboud University's guidelines.

Results

Through thematic analysis of the interviews, four main themes were identified: 1) The interplay of language and emotional experience, 2) Navigating cultural norms in communication 3) Institutional inclusion and exclusion practices, and 4) Communication barriers in peer relationships. Each main theme is further classified into subthemes and discussed in detail below. Participant quotes can be found in Appendix D.

Theme 1. The Interplay of Language and Emotional Experience

Language is not only a medium for communication, but also plays a central role in shaping the emotional experiences of international students. This theme explores how different language practices, such as the use of English and Dutch language switching, and the burden of language negotiation, shaped participants' emotional and communication experiences.

1.1 Dutch Language Use: Between Exclusion and Inclusion

The use of Dutch in both academic and social settings emerged as a significant factor in shaping international students' emotional and communicative experiences. Despite the institutional emphasis on English-medium of instruction, many participants reported that Dutch was commonly used and described feeling excluded as a result. This exclusion was not only practical, limiting their ability to understand and engage in conversations, but also emotional, leading to feelings of frustration, alienation, and a diminished sense of belonging. For example, IS2 described the experience of attending a Dutch-speaking family dinner, stating that it made her feel like she did not belong. Similarly, IS4 noted that Dutch interactions during social outings made her leave early, as she felt unable to participate. These accounts illustrate that language is not merely a tool to share information, but that it can also affect someone's sense of belonging. The use of Dutch in the presence of international students signalled that they were outsiders.

At the same time, some participants expressed an increased sense of belonging as their Dutch proficiency increased. For these students, learning Dutch opened up new possibilities for connection and participation. IS5 described that learning Dutch shaped his ability to connect with others, making him feel more included. In this case, Dutch became a bridge rather than a barrier, positively influencing the communication experience of international students by enhancing their ability to form relationships and communicate more easily.

These perspectives reveal the complex and contradictory role of the local language in international academic settings. While use of the local language can lead to an increased sense of belonging and connection for some, it can also exclude those who lack proficiency.

1.2 English Language as a Tool for Inclusion

For many international students, the consistent use of English played a crucial role in fostering inclusion and easing communication. Participants described that the English-speaking environment helped avoid major communication challenges, supported classroom communication, and eased integration. For example, IS9 described how English was instrumental in creating an inclusive environment where there were no communication issues. This perception of English as a shared medium of communication allowed international students to participate confidently both within and beyond the classroom.

Beyond practical comprehension, participants emphasised that English should function as the lingua franca within the university setting, given the international context of their study programmes. Participants believed that maintaining English as the primary medium of communication ensured equal access to information and equal opportunities for participation. While some participants were motivated to learn Dutch, they expressed that it should be a personal choice, not something expected in order to be included academically, as shared by IS10 (Quote 1, Appendix D).

These perspectives show that using English as a lingua franca is not only practical but also perceived as essential by participants in creating an inclusive environment where international students can communicate effectively and fully engage with university life.

1.3 Language Switching

Language switching between English and Dutch was a recurring theme in the participants' communicative experiences. While some described a positive experience, often when Dutch students switched to English, others experienced it as an exclusionary practice, particularly when conversations switched back to Dutch. These switches often occurred in informal settings or peer interactions, such as in study or sports associations, or informal conversations during class, rather than in academic settings with university staff.

For some international students, language switching was seen as a sign of accommodation. IS2 described a positive experience of language switching where everyone switched to accommodate an international student.

Other students, however, experienced switching as exclusionary, when students spoke in Dutch, refusing to speak in English. IS10 expressed her frustration (Quote 2, Appendix D). Participants described these moments as alienating, with some participants saying they fell silent or left the conversation.

These contrasting experiences show how language switching has a great influence on international students' sense of inclusion. When Dutch students adapt their language use to accommodate international students, it facilitates a more effective and inclusive interaction. However, shifts back to Dutch can disrupt the communicative flow and signal that international students do not belong. Language switching not only shapes international students' ability to communicate effectively, but also affects their sense of inclusion.

1.4 Language Negotiation Fatigue

For international students in English-medium instruction settings, language negotiation is a constant factor, shifting between languages depending on the context and people. Participants described the mental and emotional strain of having to repeatedly ask people to switch to English, or translate content that had been communicated in Dutch, as stated by IS1 (Quote 3 Appendix D). This excerpt illustrates how language negotiation is not solely related to communication, but also creates emotional strain.

The participants emphasised that the effort to manage language use in predominantly Dutch-speaking environments can be mentally and emotionally draining, underlining that language negotiation is not only a communicative task, but an invisible burden only international students carry. Participants described the need to constantly self-advocate in order to be included and understand what is going on as a subtle yet impactful barrier to communication. These experiences show that, although English should be the shared medium of communication, the responsibility to enforce that often falls on international students. These challenges, though experienced interpersonally, often stem from broader academic inconsistencies in language policies, as described in Theme 3.

Theme 2 Navigating Cultural Norms in Communication

This theme explores how international students navigated unfamiliar cultural norms that influenced their communication experiences. While Theme 4 focuses specifically on peer relationship formation and barriers, this theme focuses on how broader cultural norms shaped how participants communicated and interpreted interactions in the host culture. Participants described challenges in adapting to a more direct communication style, expectations in forming social relationships, and how stereotypes about their country of origin shaped their communication.

2.1 Directness in Communication

Several participants commented on Dutch directness, noting it as a distinct feature in communication. This style was initially interpreted as rude, contrasting with more indirect styles that some participants were used to. These differences influenced how participants interacted with Dutch peers, including when to speak and how they phrased their utterances, as well as how they interpreted responses. IS5 described that this kind of communication was quite different from what he was used to, as he explained he comes from a more high-context culture. Although he perceived it as quite blunt at first, he also expressed an appreciation for this honest and open communication. IS9 expressed similar sentiments (Quote 4, Appendix D).

Participants reported that adapting to directness involved reshaping their communication practices to suit local norms, for example by becoming more comfortable with expressing things in a more straightforward manner. This adjustment was described as gradual and shaped how students interacted and interpreted meaning in a different communicative context.

2.2 Navigating Social Relationships

Many participants described differences in how social relationships were formed and maintained, which affected their experience when communicating with Dutch students. Participants noted that Dutch politeness was often mistaken for a genuine interest in friendship, which caused uncertainty about the developing relationships. IS8 shared this uncertainty (Quote 5 Appendix 4).

Participants also noted that they perceived differences in how social relationships were managed over time. Participants pointed out that making plans with Dutch peers often required scheduling in advance, which felt unfamiliar compared to the more spontaneous interactions and hangouts they were used to. This affected how participants made plans and

managed expectations. Furthermore, participants described that, although Dutch students were friendly on campus, the friendship often remained confined to campus and felt that it would require more effort to develop the friendship outside of an academic setting.

These perceived differences influenced how international students approached communication with Dutch peers, with many noting that understanding and adjusting to social norms was necessary in building relationships.

2.3 Communicative Impact of Stereotyping

Several participants reported that stereotypes shaped how others perceived and interacted with them. These stereotypes were not always overt, but could lead to assumptions about participants' values and behaviours. For example, IS3 described that his Arabic background led to assumptions of conservative values, making him feel like he had to adjust how he expressed himself, and having to clarify his views in order to prove the assumptions were untrue.

Several other participants reported instances of inappropriate comments or microaggressions related to their cultural background, including jokes about the Second World War (IS9, from Germany) or racialised backhanded comments regarding skin colour and accent (IS6, from Aruba).

Lastly, participants felt that Dutch students assumed they were only at university to obtain a degree and would leave soon after, discouraging locals from forming deeper connections with international students, with IS10 stating: *"I feel like people think internationals will just go back. [...] Why bother getting close when they're going to leave anyway"*.

These experiences show how stereotyping can create barriers to open communication. Participants suggested that underlying assumptions made it more difficult to communicate

openly, as they felt that Dutch peers were biased. This could make it more challenging for international students to express themselves freely in everyday interactions.

Theme 3. Institutional Inclusion and Exclusion Practices

This theme describes the inclusion and exclusion practices of academic institutions as experienced by participants. Participants described inconsistent application of language policies, barriers to the accessing information and resources, feelings of exclusion at events and associations, experiences of group separation, as well as positive examples of support.

3.1 Inconsistent Language Practices and Information Access

More than half of the participants reported issues with the inconsistent application of language policies, particularly when Dutch was used in a classroom setting by students and, at times, university staff. This inconsistency limited international students' access to information and hindered their participation in class discussions. Science students reported severe flaws within the teaching assistant system, where supervisors often only spoke Dutch, with IS8 raising concerns about communication and even safety as international students could miss crucial information due to the language gap (Quote 6, Appendix D). Participants noted that it was difficult to know when to interrupt their Dutch-speaking supervisors, as they were unsure if the conversation was important. Participants reported that this made communication feel awkward and inefficient. Additionally, they described how they were burdened with the responsibility of enforcing the language policies, which caused feelings of frustration.

Several participants described their views on the accessibility of information and resources, with some expressing that access was generally quite good, as everything was communicated in both Dutch and English, whereas other participants described language barriers in emails, course content, or academic support. Participants described feeling

frustrated as they were burdened with the responsibility of ensuring the information would be provided to them in English

These inconsistencies in language practices influenced how easily international students could access the necessary resources and information, and often created uncertainty around when and how to communicate effectively, as well as feelings of frustration by being burdened with the responsibility of enforcing language policies.

3.3 Language Barriers in Events and Associations

Many participants described feeling excluded from university events and associations due to the frequent use of Dutch. Despite being open to all students, the prevalence of Dutch often left international students feeling unwelcome or unable to participate. Events such as the career fair or Radboud Reflects were seen as inaccessible, with participants noting that few workshops were offered in English.

Study and sports associations were described as particularly exclusionary. Participants noted that while the associations were technically open to international students, communication within them was largely in Dutch, making it hard for non-Dutch speaking students to engage. Due to the communication barrier caused by Dutch language use, participants reported that they did not come to activities, hindering their ability to form connections with Dutch peers. IS10 expressed disappointment and frustration with a study association: *“It’s all in Dutch and no one gives a s** if you don’t speak English or not. [...] Honestly, we’re not coming to these activities because no one’s speaking in English and no one really cares that we’re there”*.

These accounts suggest that language use in university events and associations significantly affected international students’ communication experiences, limiting opportunities for connection and informal interaction outside of the classroom.

3.4 Structural Separation

Several participants described experiences that suggest structural separation between Dutch and international students, particularly through language practices and group separation. Participants stated that it often felt like this structural separation was designed for the comfort of Dutch students rather than for the benefit of international students, as expressed by IS3 (Quote 7, Appendix D). Participants described that they were placed into separate groups during Intro Week, in mentor groups, and lab groups, hindering integration with Dutch peers. Participants felt that this separation sidelined them, making it harder to establish successful ways of communication and connection. Participants expressed a desire for integrated groups as they felt like this would create an environment that could encourage more frequent use of English and open communication, allowing international and Dutch students to connect.

3.5 Instances of Effective Support

While many participants described exclusionary practices, several also shared experiences of effective support from university staff, particularly professors who made an effort to include them in class. Participants described these efforts as small but meaningful gestures, such as switching to English or asking others to provide a translation (Quote 8, Appendix D). Others emphasised that professors consistently used English in class, which helped to create a more inclusive environment..

Theme 4. Communication Barriers in Peer Relationships

This theme explores communication barriers that international students encountered when trying to establish peer relationships with Dutch students. In contrast to Theme 2, which addresses the adaptation to broader cultural norms, this theme focuses on the interpersonal dynamics between international and Dutch students. Participants described several challenges that made it difficult to build connections, such as Dutch language use, a

preference for familiar groups, and limited initiation and reciprocity. Additionally, participants perceived that Dutch students were often unaware of their exclusionary practices, and some participants reported downplaying these moments themselves, which contributed to communication barriers and hindered developing social relationships.

4.1 Communication Barriers in Dutch Peer Interaction

Several participants reported multiple factors that made it challenging to develop meaningful relationships with Dutch students. A recurring issue was the use of Dutch, which made it challenging for non-Dutch speaking students to participate in conversations. Participants expressed a desire for the use of English, as this would facilitate communication and help in connecting with Dutch peers. Participants also noted a general preference for familiar groups in both international and Dutch students, with students gravitating towards peers who shared a similar linguistic or cultural background as stated by IS3 (Quote 9, Appendix 4). Participants felt like this further limited opportunities for interaction, and stated that both groups should make an effort to interact with each other. Additionally, participants felt that the responsibility for initiating communication fell on them, and that this either went unnoticed or not reciprocated.

These accounts illustrate how language use, group boundaries, and unequal effort to interact shaped participants' peer communication experiences.

4.2 Unintentional Exclusion and its Impact on Peer Interaction

Several students perceived that Dutch students were often unaware of how their actions might exclude international students. Participants attributed this unawareness to ignorance around the language needs of international students. At the same time, some international students acknowledged that they downplayed these exclusionary moments, framing them as unintentional. Participants stated that they would often not address the issue

as they did not want to make the interaction awkward. This contributed to a dynamic where instances of exclusion were often not addressed by participants.

These accounts suggest that when exclusion is perceived as unintentional, it can be challenging for international students to address these issues, reinforcing a communicative barrier between them and Dutch peers.

Overall the findings reveal that language use, cultural norms, and institutional practices significantly influence the communication experiences of international students. While English was often seen as a tool for inclusion, the use of Dutch and inconsistent language policies led to exclusion and communication barriers. However, participants also acknowledged effective support from university staff and peers who made efforts to accommodate them. These insights emphasise the interplay between language, culture, and communication in shaping international students' emotional experience and ability to connect.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to investigate to what extent international students experience communication challenges in an English-medium of instruction context.

The findings of this study diverge from Zhang and Mi (2010), who found that an insufficient command of the English language was the primary communication problem of international students in university context. In the current study, participants reported having no trouble communicating with peers in English, instead highlighting that communication issues experienced by international students were largely due to an insufficient command of the local language, creating a communication barrier, as well as leading to feelings of exclusion, alienation, and frustration. This is in line with findings by Lan (2022), who found that international students struggled with the frequent use of the local language. A possible explanation for the discrepancy with the research by Zhang and Mi (2010) may lie in the linguistic environments of the studies. While Zhang and Mi (2010) examined international students in an Anglophone country, the present study focused on a non-Anglophone context. Here, international students navigate academic life in English, but encounter social interactions predominantly in Dutch. This contrast suggests that the nature of linguistic challenges faced by international students is context-dependent and influenced by the host country's dominant language. It is therefore important that future EMI policies developed in non-Anglophone countries acknowledge and address the complexities of a multilingual environment.

In line with previous research, this study found that, although English is the default language in academic settings, the local language is often employed to ensure comprehension for local students (Dong et al, 2025; Kim & Tatar, 2017; Lan 2022). Consistent with Lan's (2022) findings, many international students expressed dissatisfaction with this practice, as they felt that this was unfairly advantaging local students and excluded them from fully

participating in class discussions. This aligns with Dong et al. (2025), who found that international students expect English to be the lingua franca in international settings, viewing it as essential for effective communication and social inclusion. This may emphasise a fundamental tension in EMI settings: While accommodating local students may improve comprehension, it undermines the inclusivity that these policies aim to create.

To some extent, the findings support previous research indicating that international students are generally accepting of local language use in English-medium of instruction settings (Dong et al., 2025). Several participants expressed understanding towards the occasional use of Dutch, particularly in informal settings, among local peers, or when ensuring comprehension for local students as long as it did not take away from their own understanding. However, this acceptance was not expressed by all, as some participants reacted strongly against the use of the local language, especially in academic settings, viewing it as exclusionary and incompatible with the EMI policy that claims English is the lingua franca. A possible explanation for this might be related to the levels of willingness to learn Dutch, as well as personal views on whether the university should fully accommodate international students by maintaining English-only communication. Those who were more resistant to the use of Dutch often expressed that the burden of adaptation should not fall on international students, especially when the university markets itself as an English-only environment.

The present study found that international students perceived Dutch peers to hold stereotypes about their countries of origin. While these findings bear some resemblance to Ruble and Zhang (2013), who identified specific assumptions held by American students about Chinese international students, the focus of the studies differ significantly. Ruble and Zhang (2013) examined host students' beliefs, whereas the present study explored international students' perceptions of being stereotyped. As such, it is not possible to

determine whether the stereotypes described by participants reflect the actual views of Dutch students. Nonetheless, this study offers a valuable contribution by providing the perspective of international students themselves, highlighting how perceived stereotyping may influence their communicative experiences and sense of inclusion.

An interesting finding is that of the perceived assumption that international students would return to their home countries immediately after graduation. The assumption that international students are transient may contribute to a lack of initiation from host students. Participants felt like this assumption discouraged locals from forming deeper connections, viewing relationships with international students as temporary, thus not worth investing in. Although this study captures international students' experiences of such perceptions, it does not confirm whether Dutch students actually hold these beliefs. Nonetheless, the impact of perceived transience warrants further investigation from both student groups' perspectives.

The findings of the current study support Hall's (1976) framework, distinguishing between high- and low-context cultures, focusing on how much meaning is conveyed through explicit or implicit communication. The findings indicate that students from high-context cultures found the directness in communication challenging, who often perceived this as rude. Interestingly, even students from low-context cultures perceived Dutch directness as rude. This could suggest that Dutch directness is perceived as unusually blunt, even within cultures with similar communication styles, which could indicate that the challenges with Dutch directness might not be solely related to cultural background, but also to how directness is expressed in the Dutch context.

This study has several limitations. One potential limitation is the possibility of self-selection bias, as participants who volunteered may be those with particularly strong experiences. Future studies could prevent this by using a different sampling technique or some form of randomisation. Furthermore, subjectivity might have been introduced in

qualitative analysis, where the researcher's interpretations and coding decisions play a crucial role.

Although there are several limitations, this study offers insight into the communication challenges faced by international students in a non-Anglophone country. The findings of this study suggest a need for more research on the experiences of international students in EMI settings in non-Anglophone countries. Much of the existing literature has focused on Anglophone countries, where English proficiency is often the primary focus. However, this study showed that challenges of international students relate to local language proficiency and cultural contrasts. These differences emphasise the importance of exploring international student experiences across diverse linguistic and cultural settings to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their communication challenges. The results of this study also suggest that universities need clearer and more consistently enforced language policies. The use of Dutch in EMI classrooms, despite the English policies, created an exclusionary environment for international students. While much attention is given to formal classroom settings, this study emphasises the need for improvement in informal university settings, such as events and associations, which were often exclusionary due to the dominant use of Dutch. Future studies should also include the perspective of local students and university staff to provide a more well-rounded understanding of intercultural communication dynamics.

In conclusion, this study offers insight into the communication challenges of international students in EMI university settings, revealing that challenges faced in non-Anglophone countries differ from those in Anglophone countries, suggesting that communication is not only shaped by language, but also by cultural expectations and norms. The findings show that local language use, differing communication styles, and exclusionary practices greatly affected international students' experiences. Addressing these challenges

requires changes to institutional policies, as well as mutual effort from both international and Dutch students to foster an environment suitable for more inclusive and open communication.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Demographic questions:

- What is your age?
- What is the gender you identify with?
- What is your country of origin?
- What is your mother tongue?
- What degree program are you following?

Interview questions:

Overall experience international student

- What has your experience as an international student been like?

Cultural differences

- What cultural differences were most noticeable for you when you first got to the Netherlands?
- Have you encountered any stereotypes about your background or country of origin that have affected your communication?
- Have you encountered any communication challenges in your social life in the Netherlands as an international student?
- To what extent do you think communication challenges are linked to cultural differences?

Language barriers

- To what extent do you think language proficiency has affected your communication experience?
- Have you experienced the use of Dutch in the classroom?
 - How did you feel about that?
- Have you experienced the use of Dutch outside of the classroom?
 - How did you feel about that?

Improving communication

- What do you think could be done by the university to improve communication with international students?
- What do you think students could do to improve communication with international students?
- What do you think professors could do to improve communication with international students?

Appendix B

Information Form

INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Communication Challenges of International Students

Introduction

We would like to invite you to participate in a research study. Participation is voluntary. Before you decide whether or not to take part, we will give you information about the study. Please take time to read the information carefully. If something is not clear, or you would like more information, please ask the researcher. The contact details can be found at the bottom of this letter.

Outline and aim of the research study

This study aims to explore the extent to which international students experience communication challenges in English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) contexts at universities. As universities are becoming increasingly internationalised and diverse, it is crucial to identify the communication challenges faced by international students so that policies can be adapted accordingly. These challenges may stem from cultural differences, language barriers, or other factors. By increasing awareness of these issues, universities can develop more inclusive EMI policies, fostering effective communication, contributing to a positive university experience, supporting academic success, and facilitating the formation of meaningful social relationships.

Previous research has primarily focused on Asian students in English-speaking countries in North America, Australia, and Asian countries. International students with other cultural or linguistic backgrounds studying in non-English speaking countries are underrepresented in the existing literature. This study seeks to contribute to this area by interviewing international students from diverse backgrounds studying in the Netherlands, aiming to determine if the communication challenges they face differ from those uncovered in prior research.

Who is conducting the research study?

This research is conducted by Julia Rave, bachelor student International Business Communication, and supervised by Dr. Afrooz Rafiee.

What does participation in the study entail?

In this study you will be answering 14 open-ended interview questions. These interviews will be taking place face-to-face on the Radboud campus in a room reserved by the researcher. The interview process will last a maximum of 30 minutes and will be audio recorded.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in this research is voluntary. This means that you can stop your participation and withdraw your consent at any time during the study, without giving a reason. Withdrawing from or stopping participation will not have any adverse consequences for you.

What data do we collect and how do we handle it?

In this study we collect research data. These will be used for scientific purposes. As part of the study, demographic data, such as age, gender, country of origin, mother tongue, and degree program will be gathered to better understand the participants' backgrounds. This information will allow for potential comparisons with other participants and help understand how these backgrounds might relate to the communication challenges discussed in the existing research. Additionally, qualitative data will be collected through responses to interview questions, recorded both in audio form and through written notes by the researcher. This will allow for a comparison of responses across participants and with the existing literature, ultimately helping to answer the research question.

The data will be anonymised. Each participant will receive a number, such as IS1 (International Student 1) for interviewee 1, to maintain anonymity. The anonymised research data may be of interest to other scientific research, and will therefore be available to other scientists for at least 10 years. Because the research data are anonymous they cannot be traced back to you.

In this study, audio recordings are made during the interview. These recordings are transcribed and we use the written text for our analysis. Recognisable items, such as names, are removed from the text. The original recordings are stored securely for at least 10 years according to Radboud University guidelines. These original recordings are not shared with other scientists, unless you give explicit permission. The same applies to use in a lecture class or in a scientific lecture. On the consent form, you can indicate what you give permission for.

All research and personal data are safely stored following the Radboud University guidelines.

Access for control purposes

Some persons need to have access to your personal and research data. This is necessary to check whether the data have been stored in accordance with the rules. Persons who carry out this check are, for example, the data officer and designated data management staff at Radboud University. They will keep your data confidential.

Your consent

Your data may only be used for our study if you give permission for this in the consent form. You may withdraw your consent, even after you have participated. You can have your research data and personal data deleted until *[specify period here, e.g. two weeks]* after participation. You can do this by sending an email to *[email address researcher]*. If you withdraw your consent, all data collected up to that point will be deleted *[NB not all research allows data to be deleted if consent is withdrawn; check carefully what applies to your study and adjust the text if necessary]*.

Do you have any questions?

If you have any questions or would like more information about the research study, please contact *[name and email address researcher]*. For other questions about this study (e.g. data processing), please contact privacy@let.ru.nl

Ethical assessment and complaints

This research study has been approved by the Ethics Assessment Committee Humanities of Radboud University (EACH file number 20XX-XXXX *[fill out file number]*)

Should you have any complaints regarding this research, please contact the researcher.

You can also file a complaint with the secretary of the Ethics Assessment Committee Humanities of Radboud University (etc-gw@ru.nl).

Consent form

If you want to participate in this research study, we ask you to sign the consent form. With this written consent, you declare that you have understood the information we have provided and consent to participate in this research study.

Kind regards,

Julia Rave

Julia.rave@ru.nl

Appendix C

Consent Form



CONSENT FORM

For participation in the scientific research study: *Communication Challenges of International Students*

Statement of participant

- The aim of the research study has been outlined to me.
- I was given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research study.
- I participate voluntarily in the research study.
- I understand that I can stop at any point during the research study, should I wish to do so.
- I understand how the data of the research study will be stored and how they will be used.
- I agree that the data officer and designated data management staff of Radboud University may view my data.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw my consent to the use of data from the study as described in the information document.
- I consent to participating in the research study as described in the information document.

I also agree that:

- The following personal data will be collected, used, and stored for this study: age, gender, country of origin, mother tongue, and degree program.

- Audio recordings are made of me for scientific purposes.

- The anonymised research data will be available for at least 10 years for review and reuse in future scientific research.

Name:

.....
.....

Signature: Date:

Statement of executive researcher

I declare that I have informed the above-mentioned person correctly about the research study and that I abide by the guidelines for research as stated in the protocol of the Ethics Assessment Committee Humanities.

Name:

.....

Signature: Date:

Appendix D

Participant Quotations

Quote 1: IS10 stated: *“I feel like university should be in English [...] We are not obliged to speak Dutch at university.”*

Quote 2: IS10 stated: *“I’ve had that a lot of times from students where [...] I’m like, are we in an English degree or why the f** are you speaking Dutch right now? [...] They still didn’t care. They still only spoke Dutch”.*

Quote 3: IS1 described this burden: *“You have to communicate that ‘oh, I don’t really like—I don’t understand, could you please send that in English?’ so I don’t have to have this extra mental load”.*

Quote 4: IS9: *“It can be perceived as rude if you’re not used to it, but I actually kind of like it”.*

Quote 5: IS8 stated: *“Everyone is polite here. So I would expect them to invite me to hang out. [...] In my country, I’m not used to being that friendly unless I really want to hang out with someone.”*

Quote 6: IS8 shared an incident in the lab: *“The most frustrating is really the lab, because I feel like it’s very, very, very important that English is spoken for safety.”.*

Quote 7: IS8 stated: *“[This] just took the awkwardness away from the Dutch people”.*

Quote 8: IS10 shared: “She doesn’t speak English, but she always apologises and turns to a Dutch student and says, ‘Can you please translate?’ She’s really trying. [...] I love that woman so much. She’s so kind.”

Quote 9: IS3: “*Dutch students like to only hang out [with each other] because there's the same culture, same language [...] so what ends up happening is that other internationals find their own groups*”.