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English as *Lingua Franca* and First Language Comfort Zones at an Internationalized University in Warsaw

ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study has been to analyse the use of English as *lingua franca* at an internationalised university in a non-English speaking country, the challenges caused by the need to use English for academic and social purposes as well as the use of other languages by a multicultural student community.

Methodology: The methodology was based on qualitative research and involved open-ended interviews with students of 14 nationalities as well as staff members, both local (Polish) and from English-speaking countries.

Findings: The main findings indicate: a degree of mismatch between the self-perception of English language competence and the actual ability to use it; the key function of language for social bonding; frequent recourse to first language comfort zones rather than the use of the *lingua franca.*

Value Added: The research focuses on English language issues in a non-English speaking country, an understudied area in higher education. It draws attention to the use of Russian as a secondary *lingua franca* among students for whom it is their other language of fluent communication.

Recommendations: University level educators should be more aware of the specificity of the problems in the use of English by international students, including such as underestimated listening comprehension issues, tensions connected with the use of polite forms and the mismatch between communication skills in English and the academic needs. The impact of language identity on international students social networking should be taken into account as well.

Key words: English, lingua franca, internationalized higher education, first language, communication

JEL codes: I21 (Education and Research Institutions / Analysis of Education) plus, I23 (Education and Research Institutions/ Higher Education - Research Institutions)

Introduction

The use of English as lingua franca is a *fait accompli* of the modern world. Within a plethora of its functions in the globalized world English has also become the language of academia, including the dynamically developing sector of international higher education, where it is used both for instruction and social communication. Yet internationalized universities, especially in non-English speaking countries, remain strongly multilingual communities. The presence of multiple languages in such multicultural academic communities results in diverse patterns of social interaction and personal identities which stem from the choice and fluency in the use of language/s.

The findings reported in this paper have been obtained through interviews conducted in a department of English Studies at a private university in Warsaw, Poland, where the language of instruction is English, while students represent multiple nationalities. The dominant languages in use, apart

from English, are the local Polish, and then Russian, Chinese and Spanish. These languages do not exhaust the linguistic diversity as students in this institution represent nearly 50 countries. The majority come from the former republics of the Soviet Union (especially Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan), but also China, Turkey and Spain. To some extent this national distribution corresponds to the overall situation in Poland – in recent years the largest groups of international students have come from Ukraine, Belarus, India, Norway, Spain and Sweden (MNiSW, 2013, p. 16; Pucułek, 2017), both as degree students and through mobility programs.

In the analysed group the interviewed students were English majors (both degree and mobility students) of the following nationalities: 14 Chinese, 12 Ukrainian, 8 Turkish, 3 Kazakh, 3 Uzbek, 2 Armenian (with Russian citizenship), 2 Belorussian, 2 Russian, 2 Spanish, 1 Egyptian, 1 Italian, 1 Moroccan, 1 South Korean. Additionally 15 local Polish students were interviewed, as well as 11 faculty members (Polish, Canadian, British, Irish, South-African). Altogether 78 respondents agreed to answer questions related to the experience of being part of a multicultural academic community. The interviews took place between 2015 – 2018. Each lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. They were conducted in English, with Polish students and Polish faculty members usually in Polish. Fragments from the interviews are quoted verbatim, in the case of those conducted in Polish, in translation.

The basis for the interview was qualitative methodology, employing an open-ended interview format. The interviews were similar in style to those practiced in ethnography – generally unstructured and not standardized. The assumption was that, considering the diversity of the interviewees, the ethnographic approach would be useful, that is following the train of thought of the interviewee who, though prompted, largely determines which themes and in which order s/he wants to mention them (Kostera & Krzyworzeka, 2012, p. 176). There was a framework for the interview, but the interviewees were allowed to wander away from the question asked. Free, open-ended interviews enabled them to reveal how they felt in the academic reality of an

international university, thus also taking into account their different, culturally determined styles of conversation. "Interviews enable participants – be they interviewers or interviewees – to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view." (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 267). The framework for the interview included warm-up questions to encourage a positive atmosphere, followed by lead questions referring to the following cross-cultural perspectives: communication and interaction with the faculty and fellow students, use of English and other languages, non-verbal communication, classroom interaction, time perception and any other issues which the respondent felt were of interest in his/her perception of the academic environment. Use of English and other languages came through as one of the main motifs in each interview.

Self-perception of English skills

In the department of English Studies from which the interviewees were recruited, a high level of proficiency in English is expected of all students at the entry to the programme. In reality, however, both degree and mobility students represent diverse skills in English. Still, most interviewees claimed, directly or indirectly, that their competence in English was good or very good. Only some Chinese, Turkish and Spanish students admitted having problems. Chinese students in particular complained about difficulties with listening comprehension and in expressing themselves. Asked about specific difficulties in the use of English some interviewees added such details as the word order or use of pronouns, but mostly listening comprehension, academic writing and speaking were indicated as problematic areas. The listening comprehension difficulties were largely confirmed by the faculty, as one teacher interviewee noted, "[students'] listening skills are atrocious".

The interviewees, with the exception of some of the Chinese ones, had sufficient fluency to carry on conversation in the interviews which, on purpose, went on in a stress-free atmosphere. Yet most interviewees' use of

English was challenged by diverse types of grammatical, lexical and phonetic problems. Asked about the ease of communication interviewees tended to say that it was easy to communicate with the teachers, but sometimes less so with fellow students. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the faculty are often trained in the area TEFL, and both NS and NNS of English can in some way adapt their speaking style to international students whose listening comprehension may not be well developed. The adaptation to the needs of NNS of English was confirmed by a Chinese student who had studied finance in England before coming to Poland and commented that "teachers' English here [in Warsaw] is better than in the UK". What transpired from the interview with her was that during her studies in Britain she could not understand spoken English for a long time, especially as the majority of her teachers at the British university were from India. The Chinese student claimed that it had taken her most of the semester to finally begin to under-stand her UK lecturers. In Warsaw she experienced no problems.

Some international students noted difficulties with listening comprehension ascribing them to what they perceived as the Polish way of using English. One of the Chinese interlocutors said that at the beginning of her stay in Warsaw "Polish English was a big problem", and this was her first experience of studying outside of China. A Turkish respondents also said she needed time to get used to English in Poland which she said was at first "a bit difficult". Yet such experiences were mentioned only occasionally.

Altogether language issue at the university in Warsaw seems less of a problem than it is reported in Sovic's (2013, pp. 95–97) study of experiences of international art students in London. Negative experiences reported by the students in that study often seem to have language as the trigger. British teachers in the UK mostly do not make any concessions towards international students in terms of pace of speaking or the use of idiom, as their priority are UK students. Since in Warsaw all students (including home students) are non-native users of English, teachers (Polish and native speakers of English) in one way or another adjust their English, if not in the teaching materials,

than certainly in oral communication. All this provides students with a sense of comfort in communication, which, however, often leads them astray when it comes to more challenging academic tasks. The opinion of the faculty members on the students' English language skills was often critical. They confirmed that there seemed to be a problem between the self-perception of sufficient English language skills by the students themselves and inadequate competence for academic tasks.

Most students speak fluently, function without problems among English-speaking peers, communicate with teachers, participate in some class activities, but are not prepared to use English for academic purposes of reading and writing. Their command of English represents "surface fluency" which is deceptive, as has been noted by various observers of international students using English for studying (Cammish, 1997, p. 144). Such students, speaking English fluently, do not understand texts above those that can be found on the Internet and are unable to write grammatically, control sentence structure or create texts in a complex way required for an academic degree. The discrepancy between oral skills sufficient for functional English and those skills required for academic proficiency results in a strong sense of discomfort to deal with the requirements. Writing for academic purposes involves special skills far above functional English, such as the use of complex sentence structure, academic vocabulary and register, appropriate conventions, impersonal style with preference for passive voice, use of evidence and references. "Academic writing involves the ability to communicate ideas following the epistemological frameworks and disciplinary conventions of a given subject or a field of knowledge (Górska, 2013, p. 191)". Lack of command of more sophisticated English often leads to failure in key courses, in Practical English exams or diploma seminars. One of the Ukrainian interviewees stressed how easy it was to communicate with the teachers, but the same student had serious problems with writing her MA thesis. A teacher interlocutor noted that in fact all students have sufficient language skills for communication, even Chinese students who are most

likely to have problems, but for academic needs students' language skills are frequently insufficient. Content courses in particular create difficulties to students of all nationalities; questions asked by teachers in class often need to be rephrased so that students understand. Answers are related to the questions, but only vaguely. Possibly the problem here is not only linguistic but also connected to the ability to transform information.

An indication of a greater comfort in the use of the first language rather than English is evident in the tendency of Polish students to switch to Polish in individual conversations with Polish tutors, regardless of whether the aim is social or academic. This turn towards search for comfort becomes even more striking in the case of Ukrainian, Belorussian or Russian students who become fluent in Polish. Their fluency in the local language is usually achieved as a result of the length of stay (often more than 3 years), a part-time (or even full-time) job in the Polish-speaking environment, learning Polish in some systematic way and sometimes some prior knowledge of Polish (family roots). When these students become fully comfortable using Polish, it definitely facilitates their functioning within the Warsaw academic environment, also in the areas of communicating with fellow Polish students and with the Polish university administration. Then they also tend to approach Polish teachers through the medium of Polish. With regard to this last situation there is no practical need to do so – English would work equally well. Yet often they clearly begin to prefer Polish over English, or they enter the process of code-switching, "moving from one language to another in the same communicative act" (Komorowska & Krajka, 2016, p. 44). Code-switching may be a sign of language shift or language loss, "but it can also derive from a consciously chosen conversational strategy" (Extra & Verhoven, 1999, p. 43). Students who code-switch in English and Polish probably apply this strategy in situations when they feel that using Polish is more adequate, for emotional or practical reasons. The emotional factors may involve the desire for stronger bonding with Poles, while the practical need would include for instance the use of vocabulary connected with living in Poland, such

as *"tramwaj"* (Polish for tram, streetcar) or *"dziekanat"* (students' office). In either case code-switching represents what Komorowska & Krajka (2016, p. 57) suggest, that is *"empathy and creativity"* in conversation. However, inadequacy in the use of English may remain a factor as well, and the local language replaces the lingua franca.

Other research indicates that studying in Poland, when the programme is conducted in Polish, makes foreign students happier than when they study in English: "Lower satisfaction levels were reported among those foreign students who followed their programme of studies in English than among those who studied in Polish." (Bryła, 2015, p. 2076). In view of that it becomes understandable why, even when the international students' ultimate goal is to excel in English, once they can communicate in Polish, they switch to the local language, or code-switch in English and Polish.

The faculty's observations of students problems in the use of English for academic efficiency are similar to the results of a study conducted in the United States with reference to international students' retention at American universities (Schulte & Choudaha, 2014, p. 55). The study indicated a mismatch between students' evaluation of their language skills and the perception of these skills by the receiving academic institutions. In the study of top reasons why international students leave the university before graduation the institutions identified inadequate English language skills as "the fourth most important reason for departure" (Schulte & Choudaha, 2014, p. 55). The students themselves, in all categories (from BA level to doctoral), did not mention language difficulties at all. Both the American study and the research reported here suggest certain resistance on behalf of international students to accept what it really means to know English sufficiently well for academic purposes.

An underestimated problem of internationalization of higher education is the gap between emphasis on communication in TEFL and "an international mindset" (Byram, 2019, p. 100) as languages are taught with emphasis on the development of communication, but without promoting values educa-

tion. As a result communication in a *lingua franca* often stops at a functional level, without allowing for comfort of being together by people of different first languages. This phenomenon is indicated by communication networks observed at internationalized universities.

Communication networks

In order to understand the university system, especially the requirements, students use various information networks. Most interviewees indicated the same sequence in search for information: first they would ask their co-nationals, then classmates, finally the teachers. Erasmus students indicated other Erasmus students as their main social/information network, adding also the international office. The same is confirmed by other research into Erasmus students' social networks: the first group of access and support for international students is formed by their own co-nationals, the second circle by Erasmus students, and only the third by the host nation students (Biłas-Henne, 2011). This study indicated also that the level of relationship often coincided with linguistic sameness, not necessarily nationality, as Russian speaking students indicated other Russian speaking students, of various nationalities, as their main network of contact.

With regard to classroom communication all faculty respondents noted students' unwillingness to ask questions in public, although it was suggested that a degree of change occurred over the course of studies, with the third year students, regardless of national background, more likely to ask questions in public. This shift results from both acculturation and improvement in the use of English.

Chinese students tended to comment on how in Warsaw they would communicate more with teachers than at their home universities: „here you communicate more with teachers, at home – with friends"; "in China you ask with friends, here teacher"; "Chinese teachers have more students to take care of". Both Chinese students and Warsaw faculty would note, however,

that communication took place outside of the classroom, in a more private context, not in front of other students. One of Chinese students' generalized that in China "we raise questions after class". A faculty member felt that Asian students would not ask questions in public as they might consider it rude or demonstrating lack of respect. Chinese students would often approach faculty members with their enquiries in small groups, discussing the teacher's answer in Chinese among themselves. A faculty respondent stressed that communication attitudes of international students would be strongly connected with language competence; in her experience Asian students with good English skills would ask a lot of questions. This observation can be corroborated by a Chinese student's opinion concerning willingness to approach teachers: "the main barrier is the language".

Beyond language there is the issue of attitude and perception of the teacher by international students. One of the Kazakh interviewees, who had previously studied in her home country and in Turkey, observed "here teachers respond to your interest, they are personal in their responses though formal […] Kazakh and Turkish teachers are more like mom and dad". Sensing such a difference undoubtedly reflects the teaching staff's Western efforts at professionalism and efficiency, yet behaving in a way less influenced by the Eastern attitudes of trust and reciprocation, with the family as the model of relations. Asian students often view the teachers as having a parental role (Liu, 2001, p. 24); "[t]he Chinese see learning as depending on the teacher for knowledge, and also for care, concern and help since the teacher–student relationship is reciprocal: students respect and obey the teacher, the teacher teaches and cares for students like a parent." (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997, p. 85). The Kazakh student's use of the "mom and dad" metaphor for academic teachers refers also to the issue of care in higher education. International students, living in a foreign country, are more likely than local ones to turn to their teachers for pastoral care. The question is whether teachers are prepared for care-giving duties and how well these can be provided without a shared first language.

Some interviewees commented upon problems about receiving information in class. They felt it was insufficient that teachers tended to give instructions only once, complaining that "Information in class is given only once which is not enough", "Home assignments could be explained better" or "Sometimes they say something important only once – it's not enough, in Kazakhstan or Turkey it's repeated twice." Still the truth may be that in the home country things were not said twice, but were understood properly after the first time as there was no language barrier.

Another communication obstacle revealed in this research is the often invisible area of the rules of politeness which participants want to observe, but are not always certain of when using the *lingua franca*. The need to observe the rules of politeness and uncertainty about the linguistic apparatus for such may affect international students' willingness to communicate with their elders, the faculty members in the academic context. Polite behaviour matters in particular to students from Asian cultures, but others are equally likely to feel uncomfortable when uncertain about the appropriateness of social behavior.

One faculty interlocutor stressed students' tendency not to ask questions as much as they should and failing to enquire about important matters. In his opinion Turkish students in particular have a problem in this area, though for all students, regardless of nationality, the difficulty lies in their not knowing "the art of asking questions" and when they do ask, "it comes through as impolite". Possibly students avoid situations which feel awkward. Turkish students' reluctance to ask questions may be particularly closely linked to their unwillingness to appear rude in the interaction with teachers, because of the culture of respect towards elders in which they are raised. Turkish youth are brought up to be polite and deferential toward elders, such behaviour instilled in them at home and in school. With this strong attitude of respect the sense of inability to come up with appropriate phrasing of questions in English, connected with the school tradition of not challenging the teacher, may altogether result in an emotional condition discouraging Turkish students from interacting with the teachers when communicating in English.

They feel they may not behave in a desired style of politeness as they lack linguistic tools necessary for the appropriate impression of a person with a correct attitude towards his or her elders.

In Chinese culture children are also brought up to respect their elders. They learn it is extremely important to address adults with correct appellations. They might avoid communicating with adults when they do not know how to address them properly. Quite possibly some of that ingrained fear of trespassing the rules of politeness is present when they communicate in English, or, rather, avoid doing it not to use inappropriate forms. One of the Chinese interviewees admitted to the awareness of the possibility that Chinese users of English may sound rude. The same interviewee stressed that in contact situations with older people – such as teachers – for Chinese students the natural behavior is only to listen, not to raise questions.

Thus communication apprehension of Asian students may stem from unease about appearing im/polite while relating to their elders, as well as from the desire not to lose face in the process. Both are related to "the notion that high context cultures will produce higher levels of CA" (Pryor et al., 2005, p. 247). The uncertainty in the use of appropriate English contributes to potential communication breakdowns. Insecure use of English is an element of the bigger problem of reluctance to speak in public settings and communicating with people who are higher in the hierarchy.

These problems in communication stem also from the TEFL curricula in which the art of asking questions is not given enough prominence. As a result non-native users of English are not equipped with the skill of asking questions politely. When they do ask, the utterance (or the whole experience) comes through as clumsy (because of wrong sentence structure, insufficient use of polite phrases and/or wrong intonation). Consequently, even if NNS do not fully realize what has gone wrong, they feel that communication was not quite successful and shy away from the next attempt. Polish students almost always, outside of the class context, address the Polish faculty in Polish, which may be dictated not only by the ease of communication in the

native language, but also by a greater sense of comfort with regard to the social norms of politeness. The same happens with those Ukrainian and Russian speaking students who acquire good Polish language skills after a longer stay in Poland. Such students' preference to communicate with Polish teachers in Polish is likely connected with a sense of social comfort through employing politeness as much as effectiveness of communication.

For purposes of getting information and socially adequate behavior, English as *lingua franca* in a multicultural academic community works less smoothly than might be expected. Insecurity about politeness and loss of face affect social interaction in subtle, but potentially detrimental ways.

First language zones of comfort

Language clusters at the observed university are formed in all social spaces: classrooms, corridors, cafes and the courtyard. All teachers observe certain patterns upon entering the classroom: the students have chosen such seating that they are clustered in their language zones, Polish, Chinese, Russian, Ukrainian, Turkish (though usually with some individuals breaking the pattern), chattering in their own languages. The criterion for clustering together is not so much nationality as the linguistic comfort provided by the first language, visible in the ease with which Russian speaking students establish small groups regardless of nationality. Russian speaking students come from the former Soviet Union, but represent various nations – they may be Russian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Kazakh, Belarusian, Armenian. These differences may matter when it comes to friendships or other types of close relationships, but in interactions within the university context nationality is secondary to the native/first language (or the second language if the student is bilingual, as is frequently the case with Ukrainians). A Ukrainian interlocutor, speaking of Russian as "so popular here", mentioned her friends from Azerbaijan and indicated that Russian language was the basis for social bonding. An Armenian respondent with perfect use of English said she would willingly use

Russian in contacts with other Russian speaking students because "we help each other". She noted that "people here stick to their language groups". One of the Russian respondents said she usually interacted with Ukrainians because "we have the same language", adding emphatically: "when we spend time with other students speaking Russian we don't feel any barrier". One of the Ukrainian interviewees, from Western Ukraine, whose native language is Ukrainian, stressed that, especially at the beginning, she definitely preferred to be with other Ukrainians, speaking the common language.

Reliance on the first language for comfort decreases to some extent with the length of stay, while with some Slavonic students it is replaced by competent use of Polish. Ukrainian and Russian speaking students, who become fluent in Polish, begin to mix with Poles effortlessly. One of the Ukrainian respondents, with a Polish background, speaking Polish fluently, mentioned a Polish female student as her best friend. A Polish respondent expressed her opinion of good relations between Ukrainians and Poles, but added that this bonding was possible because Ukrainians were capable of speaking Polish "excellently". An Armenian respondent (Russian speaking), who quickly acquired fluent Polish, offered: "my entrance into the Polish groups was earned because I spoke Polish". She expressed her conviction that using Polish language would break the communication barrier while using English would build it, although she strongly stressed that this would not be so with all Polish students.

Apparently for many Polish students, even though they have chosen English as their field of studies, using English for out-of-class purposes, is still outside their comfort zone. The discomfort of using English was con-firmed by one of the Polish student interviewees who claimed "Poles are afraid to speak English". In consequence they might be avoiding foreign students simply because they shun the effort of small talk in English, as they have not internalized the language sufficiently to feel fully comfortable with it for social purposes. Quite likely the same is felt by foreign students who, therefore, outside the class, prefer to spend time with the same first language friends. Two Polish interviewees who insisted they cherished

speaking English and had no problems using it all the time admitted that, after several hours of classes in English, they experienced a feeling of fatigue with using a non-native language.

Chinese students lead in the tendency to stick to their own language group. Chinese respondents were quite aware of their preference to stay with their own co-nationals. This preference was noted in the interviews with other students. A Polish interviewee with a background of earlier experiences in international education stressed "we do our best to talk English to them [Chinese students]", but spoke at length about the difficulties of establishing closer relations with Chinese students. She described Asian students as "very quiet, conservative, well-behaved, friendly", pointing out that if one initiated conversation, it "ends with just a few words and doesn't lead to much, they are approachable, smile, but no deeper conversation is possible". Another Polish respondent, when talking about Chinese classmates, described them as "self-isolating" adding that she thought they were shy and maybe not sure if they would manage. Other respondents described Chinese students using phrases such as: "Chinese always stick together"; "Asian students seem happier with their own friends"; or generalized "the cultures of the East do not mix [with others]". The interlocutor who noted Chinese students' preference for their own company stressed that she had observed the same absence of interaction between Asian and non-Asian students in two other countries where she had received some of her education, namely in the Netherlands and in Scotland. From both these countries she recalled the same images of Chinese students "whispering among themselves, very much into technology, happy when left to themselves". This observation complies with what one of the Chinese interlocutors has formulated as "our habit to get together", when asked about interacting with Chinese or non-Chinese students. One of the Uzbek interviewees complained about the difficulty of communicating with Polish students, who seemed unwilling to interact, but stressed that it was easy for her to form relationships with Chinese students. In that case the language of communication was English, though this interviewee said that

she also interacted easily with Ukrainians, but on the grounds of Russian, her second language, which she could use fluently.

Chinese students in the interviews largely confirmed that the interaction with non-Chinese may be difficult. One of the interviewees clearly mentioned a potential sense of embarrassment in communication with non-Chinese students. Another said simply "we are totally different" while yet another pointed out that "Chinese students are a little shy" and sometimes "don't know how to start a conversation". There was a suggestion "it may be humiliating to talk to other students". Still, desires to establish contact were expressed: "we want to make foreign friends", "[we] like to get along with foreign students", "[we] like to talk to people from different countries". The very last statement came in answer to the question about the best aspect of the experience of studying in Warsaw, and came along with the statement that the interlocutor "was not good at being with strangers, now better". The Chinese interviewees spoke diversely of contacts with Polish students: positively when giving opinions such as "I like Polish students", "Polish students are very friendly", but also more problematically, formulating their observations as "Polish students are a little bit indifferent" and "they [Polish students] look very cold but maybe they are not like that". One Chinese respondent stressed it was natural for Chinese people to keep together, but in her case she appreciated the fact that in her particular MA program there were no other Chinese students – this way her social contacts were students of other nationalities.

The above responses of Chinese students suggested some willingness to get involved in intercultural communication and take steps towards integration with the host academic community. Yet culturally different patterns of interaction and insecure English language skills create a challenge while remaining within one's own language zone gives a sense of emotional comfort.

The first/native language as a key factor of social interaction is by no means a specific Warsaw phenomenon. Similar examples can be quoted from other parts of the world. When American students decide to take part

of their study abroad, they mostly go to English speaking countries. Some choose Italy and Spain, still, as Martha Bayles observes, they tend to travel in groups, "perhaps learning something of the culture but rarely becoming immersed in the language. Indeed, according to one expert, most American students who brave non-English-speaking countries tend to remain in English speaking enclaves, including 'transplanted' American college environments." (Bayles, 2014, p. 224).

Existence of native language speaking enclaves seems to be part and parcel of international academic institutions. The same language implies the ease of similar cultural patterns. Using the native language provides the comfort of avoiding misunderstandings of expression "but also of intent" (Lewis, 2006, p. 66). The existence of Russian speaking zones which put together students of various nationalities demonstrates that the first language connects people across ethnic backgrounds.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from the above study. English as the *lingua franca* is the fact and the future of communication in internationalized higher education. Yet there are areas in which it fails to work smoothly, while international students are likely to achieve higher levels of comfort and satisfaction with their studies if they learn fluently the local language. The following challenges have been noted in this research:

• The discrepancy between self-perception of English language competence and the actual ability to handle academic tasks and fulfill social functions affects both effectiveness of studying and students' well-being. This mismatch may lower international students' confidence and their academic progress.

• The fluency in the use of English for everyday communication may decrease the awareness of the necessity to progress to a higher level in the academic use of English, necessary for effectiveness and success in learning.

• Problems with English language skills, particularly listening compre-hension, may be underestimated by educators at university level and at preparatory courses.

• Inadequate competence in the use of polite forms in English affects the necessary intensity of communication with the faculty, especially in the case of Asian students who come from societies where strong significance is attached to politeness towards older people, to harmony in interpersonal relations and to the avoidance of loss of face.

• Language trumps nationality – social relations are most of all determined by linguistic identity which in the higher education context takes prece-dence over ethnic background.

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