

Beyond English? Students' Multilingual Identities in internationalized Higher Education

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Universities in Europe are increasingly becoming multilingual and multicultural spaces due to internationalization efforts. However, language policies predominantly prioritize English, often neglecting the linguistic richness brought by students' diverse backgrounds. This study explores language practices and identities among local and international students at two European universities, the University of Warwick (UK) and Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Spain). A total of 300 students completed an anonymous online survey, while 32 participated in individual interviews, during which they were asked to draw their language portrait. Results reveal English's dominance within the academic sphere at Warwick, with additional and heritage languages relegated to student-led initiatives. Conversely, at Pompeu Fabra, Catalan is crucial for local identity, even within the academic context, while English's prestige is emphasized for future career prospects. Findings highlight the need for inclusive language policies recognizing and supporting students' plurilingualism, fostering inclusivity and preparing students for global citizenship.

Full paper

Since the establishment of the European Higher Education Area, universities across Europe have collaborated to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, fostering transnational collaborations and mobility. Hence, institutions have implemented various actions to promote their internationalization (Knight, 2004). Although the reasons behind such policies may vary, internationalization has led to a growth in the number of international students. In addition, due to recent migratory flows, local students may also have heritage languages and cultures. As a result, today's universities are highly multilingual and multicultural spaces.

In this context, aligned with neoliberal ideologies, English is considered an asset (Baker, 2016). Accordingly, several European universities are investing significant effort and resources into developing language policies prompting the use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and, thus, increasing the offer of courses and programs in such a language. However, research in the field of applied linguistics shows that students often adopt plurilingual and translanguaging practices, questioning the One Language at a Time approach and the role of English as the international lingua franca (Trenchs-Parera, 2019).

Meanwhile, whilst UK universities prioritize the integration and well-being of international students, and the development of intercultural and global competences, little attention is given to languages beyond English. The prevailing belief is that 'international' students should conform to monolingual, native English speakers' norms, neglecting their plurilingual competence (Preece & Marshall, 2020). In both cases, such language policies may be damaging for those students whose full learning and interactional potential would be best brought out through a plurilingual approach and translanguaging practices. Additionally, local and international students' experiences are rarely considered together (Volet & Jones, 2012).

This study, part of an ongoing research project investigating language practices and intercultural interactions in Higher Education, adopts a comparative perspective. It explores the plurilingual repertoires and multilingual identities of local and international students at two leading internationalized universities in Europe, situated in linguistically diverse contexts: the University of Warwick, UK, and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra of Barcelona, Spain. Despite approximately 40% of Warwick's student population being formed by international students pursuing a degree in the UK, the university offers scarce opportunities to learn and use languages other than English. In contrast, the Universitat Pompeu Fabra adopts a trilingual language policy, promoting the institutional and individual use of the two co-official local languages, Catalan and Spanish, alongside English as a working language.

First, approximately 300 local and international students, from a variety of degree at the two universities, completed an anonymous online survey, including open- and closed-ended questions. Descriptive and inferential statistics provided an overview of students' language repertoires and practices across diverse contexts, including the academic setting. Also, the analysis identified differences between local and international students and within the two contexts.

Secondly, 16 students from each university took part in individual interviews. Participants were asked to draw and explain their language portrait (Busch, 2006), engaging in narrative about their linguistic experience. These data were analysed using a case-study approach, enabling an in-depth exploration of students' repertoires and multilingual identities. The interviews also provided insights into whether students perceive the university as providing adequate opportunities for language use. A comparative analysis of language portraits helped identifying common themes.

At Warwick University, results shed light on the languages present and used beyond English. While students express attachment to their first language(s), findings also suggest that English holds a dominant position as *the* language within the academic sphere (Liddicoat, 2020). Opportunities to learn and practice additional languages primarily stem from student-led initiatives. At the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, local students emphasize the value of the local language, Catalan, as a crucial identity trait, while acknowledging the importance of English for competitiveness in the job market. International students, on the other hand, prioritize Spanish as an additional international language. Results highlight how students' language practices and attitudes may be shaped by perceived prestige and social advantages.

Building on these findings, the study raises crucial questions: Can the linguistic diversity of students be made more visible? What strategies can enhance linguistic inclusivity in universities? Recognizing and giving value to individuals' language practices and multilingual identities is crucial for internationalization goals and students' future career trajectories. Moreover, the comparative approach identifies both global and context-specific challenges that may inform future actions and interventions. In conclusion, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on fostering linguistic inclusivity in internationalized higher education.

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