



## Quantifying the Language Experience of International Students

### KEYWORDS

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**ABSTRACT** *The main focus of this study is to quantify the amount of exposure to English that international students experience in the class as well as outside the class, in their daily lives while studying for a Masters Degree in the United Kingdom, and to explore their beliefs as to how it affects their English language development. The study primarily tries to quantify the amount of time spent by the international students in listening, speaking, reading and writing English language in class and outside class after coming to the UK and compare it with that of the time spent in their home country. Secondly to quantify the time spent in using their mother tongue before and after coming to the UK and finally to find out if there is an improvement in their English language proficiency.*

### 1.1 Background and rationale for current study:

Students from different parts of the world aim to study in English speaking countries. The most favoured destinations of the students are the UK, USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Trahar, 2007). In spite of the high fees, culture shock in general and the academic culture shock in particular, students long to study in the universities of these countries because of the many advantages like an internationally recognised degree from highly reputed universities, excellent quality of teaching that encourages the students to enhance their self confidence, creativity, critical thinking and overall personality development etc. Apart from these, adjustment to new culture and people, new lifestyle and climate also teach a lot to the students. One of the main reasons for the students to choose a UK university is the desire to improve their English language skills. It is noted that students improve their English language skills and communication skills as they immerse themselves in an English speaking environment in an English speaking country surrounded by native speakers of English (Davey, 2008).

Especially in the 21st century, the number of study abroad programs has increased and the students are attracted towards these programs. But countries like China are discouraging their students from going abroad, because of the economic implications and therefore they are trying to provide world class facilities, infrastructure and create an English atmosphere in their home countries (Clark as cited in Trahar, 2007). At this juncture, this study could be useful to students of different nationalities, who are studying in various UK universities at present to see how much of improvement has been achieved in the usage of English language skills of students on an average and also to students who aim to study in the UK universities in future to estimate if it is worth investing so much if it is only to improve the usage of English language skills.

### 1.2 Objectives of the study:

The purpose of the present research is to quantify the language experience of Post graduate International students studying for MATESOL and MALLE in the department of education at the University of York and to observe how it affects English language proficiency.

### 1.3 Hypothesis:

As the first objective is quantifying the language experience, Hypothesis need not be formulated. For the second objective the Hypothesis is that the increase in English language proficiency is not directly proportional to the time spent in an English land.

### 2.1 Sampling procedure and sample:

In the present research convenience/volunteer sampling was

used based on the convenience, proximity and accessibility of the participants for the research (Nunan, 2006).

### 2.2 Tools used in research:

In the present research questionnaire and interviews are used as they are appropriate for a research of this kind which is a small scale survey.

### 2.3 Description of the tool:

The validity of research can be achieved by devising and using appropriate instruments (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) so care is taken in preparing the questionnaire to see that it covers all the items that need to be quantified in order to quantify the language experience of international students. "Quantifying the language experience of international students" questionnaire consisted of 24 questions. Questions were phrased for the four language skills in order to measure the time spent by the international students in using the four basic language skills.

The information collected from an interview is rich and vivid when compared to that of data collected with the help of a questionnaire. So a schedule for a semi structured interview was prepared. Only ten questions were formulated as it was a semi structured interview.

### 3.1 Procedure of Data collection:

Methodological Triangulation was used in the present study. It is the use of two or more methods for data collection in a study. It is said to be very advantageous, as it helps in pinpointing the objectives. Relying on one method alone can distort the research and makes it biased. Triangulation allows the investigator to compare the findings from both the methods and when the results match, it helps in building confidence of the investigator (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

### 3.2 Analysis and Interpretation of Data:

The mean time or the average time spent by the students in using the specific language skills is calculated by using the formula  $\sum x / N$ , where x is the time spent by each student and N is the number of students. The Mean time spent by the students in practising the language skills is calculated in relation to their home country and after coming to UK and is tabulated as follows.

	Mean Time spent in Home Country (In Hours per week)	Mean Time spent in UK (In Hours per week)	Difference in means	% of difference in means
Listening to English in Class	9.9	8.05	-1.85	-19 %

Listening to English outside Class	7.9	13.6	5.7	72 %
Listening to Mother Tongue	19.5	12.2	-7.3	-37 %
Reading English in Class	6.5	11.45	4.95	76 %
Reading English Outside Class	6.3	6.65	0.35	6 %
Reading Mother Tongue	12	6.65	-5.35	-45 %
Speaking English in Class	4.5	5.35	0.85	16 %
Speaking English outside Class	3.3	8.9	5.6	63 %
Speaking Mother Tongue	19.4	12.6	-6.8	-54 %
Writing English in class	5.5	7.9	2.4	44 %
Writing English outside class	3.05	5.85	2.8	92 %
Writing Mother tongue	7.65	3.35	-4.3	-56 %

### The mean time spent by students on different language skills.

n = 20  
Table 1

A systematic pattern in the increase and decrease of the percentages of time spent in using the English language skills and the mother tongue can be observed. If the increase in the time spent in using a particular English language skill was more, then the decrease in the time spent in using that particular skill in the mother tongue was more. Another interesting observation is that except for reading, in the other three language skills the amount of time spent using English language is more outside the class than in the class.

Though the data from the questionnaires shows that the time spent in writing outside the class has increased most and it is followed by reading English in class and listening outside class, the international students, when interviewed, expressed the view that it is their academic writing skill that has developed the most in class when compared to all the other skills, secondly they claim to notice more improvement in speaking outside the class. One of the interviewee said that the usage of internet has increased to a large extent after coming to the UK and it was instrumental in the improvement of English language proficiency. A study on immigrant textile workers in Chicago showed that computer training acted as a motivator for language acquisition (Belcher, 2006). Similarly technology did play a role in the enhanced use of English language, and thereby helped in the English language development of international students. As the time spent in using technology is more in a UK University compared to universities in the home country, whether it is in the library with regard to issuing and searching the books, online journals and databases, VLE, online submission of the assignments or emailing, the time spent in reading English tends to be more as English is the language used by most of the advanced technology. Another international student said that listening to the BBC has become a part of the routine after coming to the UK and that was the key to acquiring native English speaker like pronunciation and language. Reading the on-

line English newspapers and other English newspapers, responding to customers while working on a part time job in a hotel or a store, travelling to new places across UK as a part of sight-seeing and asking for information while visiting, socialising in the get together parties organised by the International students Association (ISA), interacting with the native English speakers at church were some of the habits and circumstances that took most of the time in their day to day lives and were instrumental in using English language. Since the time spent in class and the activities taken up in class were the same for everyone, it was the manner in which time was spent outside the class that made more difference in the language experience of international students. Moreover the time spent in the class at the post graduate level was quite less to make a big difference in the English language proficiency of International students.

The excerpts from the interviews make it clear and evident that the language experience of international students was different from one another because of differences in their background, the place where they stayed, with whom they lived, the social skills they had, the habits they formed etc. It is agreed by the international students that having a lot of friends from their country was a big hindering block for them as it stopped them from exploring chances of using English language in the UK, supporting the view that the social experience of the international students influences their language experience (Montgomery, 2010). But there were international students who preferred to cling to their linguistic and ethnic groups. The preference to stay with their co nationals was attributed to the fact that they get the required personal support to overcome the anxiety, culture shock, academic stress and also the stress of being away from home. It has been claimed that the attitude of the learners towards a language influences the use of that particular language (Ha, 2009). So it can be argued that psychological factors pertaining to the international students also influence the amount of time spent in using English language apart from the social, geographical and physical factors.

### 3.3 Summary and conclusion

The findings support the view that foreign languages are learnt naturally, as one socialises (Knapp & Seidlhofer, 2009) because socialisation is a process which involves the concepts of spending time with people and also exposure to language. But research shows that spending time alone does not automatically improve one's language (Storch, & Hill, 2008). Though the increase in time spent in using the language improves the language to some extent, it is also influenced by other factors. Individual differences like the language aptitude, which is the natural ability to learn a language, the different kinds of motivation i.e. instrumental motivation, integrative motivation, regulative motivation and intrinsic motivation, the learning strategies consisting of cognitive strategies, meta cognitive strategies, social/affective strategies are said to influence language learning (Ellis, 2006) apart from these Intelligence, personality, learner preferences and learner beliefs are also said to influence language learning (Lightbrown & Spada, 2004). The role of environment (Best & Tyler, 2007), length of residence, relative usage of L1/L2 (Flege & Mackay as cited in Best & Tyler 2007), relative quantity and quality of input from native L2 speakers (Flege & Liu as cited in Best & Tyler 2007) also seem to be important in second language acquisition.

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