

Language Awareness

ISSN: 0965-8416 (Print) 1747-7565 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rmla20

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To cite this article: Cosmin Nada, Helen Avery & Justyna Legutko (17 May 2026): The relationship between mobility and language: experiences of international students in Europe, Language Awareness, DOI: 10.1080/09658416.2026.2672482

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2026.2672482

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Published online: 17 May 2026.

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LANGUAGE AWARENESS
https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2026.2672482

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The relationship between mobility and language: experiences of international students in Europe

Cosmin Nada[a], Helen Avery[b,c] and Justyna Legutko[b]

[a]CIES-Iscte, University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal; [b]Department of Languages, Linnaeus University, Linnaeus, Sweden; [c]Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

ABSTRACT

International mobility can provide students with opportunities for intercultural learning and developing language skills. Language proficiency is also a factor in the choice of a host university and satisfaction with study abroad programmes. The present study examines student reflections on the role language played in their academic, social, and personal experiences during international mobility, drawing on interviews with 21 international students at European universities. The findings underscore the importance of international academic languages, particularly English, but also point to the students' interest in local languages for social interaction with the community. This interest is often driven by a desire for deeper integration and to counteract national stereotypes. This research highlights the complex relationship between language and mobility, where language constitutes both a tool and a barrier. This dynamic is particularly evident in students' interactions, where communicating with other international students was often perceived as less stressful than with native speakers. Students' agency is key in navigating these dynamics, which are mediated by prevailing language ideologies and institutional constraints. Ultimately, language in international mobility settings shapes academic success, social integration, and the negotiation of personal identity.

RESUMO

A mobilidade internacional pode proporcionar aos estudantes oportunidades de aprendizagem intercultural e de desenvolvimento de competências linguísticas. A proficiência linguística também é um fator na escolha de uma universidade e na satisfação com programas de mobilidade. O presente estudo examina as reflexões de estudantes sobre o papel que a língua desempenhou nas suas experiências académicas, sociais e pessoais durante a mobilidade internacional, baseando-se em entrevistas com 21 estudantes internacionais em universidades europeias. Os resultados ressaltam a importância das línguas académicas internacionais, particularmente o inglês, mas também apontam para o interesse dos estudantes em línguas locais para a interação social com a comunidade. Esse interesse é frequentemente impulsionado pelo desejo de uma integração mais profunda e para contrapor estereótipos nacionais. Esta investigação destaca a relação complexa entre língua e mobilidade, na qual a língua constitui tanto uma ferramenta como uma barreira. Essa dinâmica é particularmente evidente nas interações dos estudantes, em que a comunicação com outrosestudantes internacionais

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 August 2025
Accepted 29 April 2026

KEYWORDS
International student mobility; languages; experience; language competence; study abroad

CONTACT Cosmin Nada cosmin.nada@iscte-iul.pt Av. das Forças Armadas, 40, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal

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foi frequentemente percecionada como menos stressante do que com falantes nativos. A agência dos estudantes é fundamental para navegar estas dinâmicas, que são mediadas por ideologias linguísticas, bem como por restrições institucionais. Em última análise, a língua em contextos de mobilidade internacional molda o sucesso académico, a integração social e a negociação da identidade pessoal.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

When students go abroad to study, language shapes many aspects of their lives (from classroom experience to friendships, to how they see themselves). This study is based on conversations with 21 international students at European universities, exploring what it really feels like to live and study in a place where you may not speak the local language fluently. Many students chose their destination partly because of language (some because they already felt confident in it, others out of 'love' for a language, and others because they saw it as useful for their future career). Once abroad, language challenges appeared in unexpected places. Several students arrived expecting their courses to be in English, only to find teachers switching to the local language, leaving them unable to follow lessons. Outside the classroom, speaking with locals could feel stressful and exhausting, while communicating with other international students – even in a foreign language – felt more relaxed because nobody expected perfection. English often served as the shared language among students from different countries, though not always: sometimes another language took its place depending on who was in the group. By the end of their stay, most students felt more confident and capable in their languages, and many described genuine pride in managing everyday life in a language that was not their own. The study also shows, however, that language gains are not automatic: they depend on where students live, who they spend time with, and what real opportunities they have to connect with the local community.

Introduction

International student mobility is a growing field of research in which the experiences of international students are approached from different perspectives, including, for instance, competence development (Schenker 2019), learning outcomes (Köylü & Borràs, 2024) or language acquisition (Róg, 2017). In this paper, we focus on higher education student experiences to better understand the role of language in the context of international student mobility, both regarding academic experiences and social interaction with other students and locals.

Language proficiency has been shown to act as a key determinant of study abroad decisions, and demonstrated language proficiency is often a component of admissions requirements (Hughes, 2008). Additionally, Ovchinnikova et al. (2024) found that foreign language competence is a predictor of participation in study abroad programmes. For instance, comfort with a particular language can significantly direct students' choices of where to study abroad. According to Brown et al. (2016: 63), 'students tend to prefer destinations where language is not a problem or where countries have cultural or historical connections', while

King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) found that prospective international students expect language improvement to be one of the key outcomes of their international sojourn. At the same time, students' language proficiency will affect the outcomes of student mobility. Previous studies across a wide range of contexts have shown that the command of the local language, the medium of instruction (Hughes, 2008, Bilecen, 2024), or a lingua franca (Ou et al., 2023), is all key to integration into academic settings and constitutes a practical tool for everyday communication and social interaction.

The study of language in international student mobility has been approached from multiple disciplinary perspectives. While research in international higher education has documented the role of language as a factor in mobility decisions and integration outcomes, the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition (e.g., Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2009) offer theoretical and empirical insights for understanding how language learning, identity construction, and ideological dimensions intersect during study abroad. In this paper, we bring these different disciplinary perspectives into dialogue, drawing on concepts from both traditions to analyse the mobility and language experiences of 21 international students in Europe. Against this background, the following two research questions were elaborated:

- RQ1: How does language shape international students' academic, social, and personal experiences during study abroad?
- RQ2: How do international students exercise agency in navigating language dynamics within the structural constraints of institutional policies and prevailing language ideologies?

To answer these research questions, we will analyse the role language plays in academic, social, and personal experiences during international mobility. This involves examining research participants' accounts about experiences abroad, how they interpret social and institutional expectations regarding language, and how they configure their identities in multilingual and multicultural settings. The theoretical framework that underpins this analysis is described in the following section.

Theoretical framework

Language policy and international student mobility

Due to the dominant position of English globally (Wilkinson & Gabriels, 2021), considerable attention has been devoted in the literature to the roles of English(es) in student mobility and the internationalisation of higher education, both in countries where English is dominant locally, and those where it is not (Baker & Hüttner, 2019; Boonsuk, 2025; Dafouz & Smit, 2021; Hughes, 2008; Hultgren, Jensen, & Dimova 2015; Sah & Fang, 2025). However, other languages—such as Russian, Spanish or French - also occupy historical positions of dominance as international languages (Ammon, 2012; Sánchez & Dueñas, 2002), while countries such as China or Turkey are today actively pursuing policies to enhance their role as destinations for student mobility (Aydinli & Mathews, 2021; Ge (Rochelle) (葛贇) 2022).

The hierarchy of languages that shapes international student mobility can be understood through De Swaan's (2013) global language system, which conceptualises languages

in a four-tier structure: peripheral, central, supercentral, and hypercentral, with English occupying the hypercentral position. This framework is particularly useful in explaining why international students from peripheral or central language environments tend to gravitate towards supercentral and hypercentral language contexts, and why English functions as the dominant lingua franca in most higher education contexts from Europe and beyond.

Furthermore, from Bourdieu's (1991) perspective, language proficiency results in different forms of linguistic capital whose value varies across institutional and social contexts. When students move across national borders, their pre-existing linguistic backgrounds are thus differentially valued in the new context, which has direct consequences for their academic and social experiences (Bilecen, 2024). The political economy of language learning in study abroad contexts has been critically examined by Mocanu (2023), who argues that international students increasingly construct what she terms "neoliberal multilingual identities". In this context, students conceptualise language skills as forms of "human capital" that are "ultimately exchangeable for money" (p. 5). This commodification process is not merely an individual response but reflects the broader marketisation of higher education, where linguistic competences become strategic investments in future employability (Duchêne & Heller, 2012, Bilecen, 2024). As Mocanu (2023) posits, such instrumental views embody a neoliberal calculus where languages become commodified assets in students' portfolios of human capital. In turn, the economic conditions that influence future job opportunities, and the dominance of certain languages in higher education, particularly English, can be understood as reflections of global power structures (Ammon, 2012; Hughes, 2008; Wilkinson & Gabriels, 2021).

The roles and functions of languages that university students encounter in the academic context are shaped by language policies in higher education. Such policies not only include the medium of instruction or admissions regulations, but the extent to which host institutions enable or actively support interaction with local students and local communities. Moreover, language policies in higher education do not appear in a vacuum—they are expressions of language ideologies (Kroskrity, 2004; Özkaynak & Sayer, 2026) and language hierarchies at global, national and local levels. By assigning different values, functions and status to languages and linguistic varieties, language ideologies can maintain existing hierarchies or contribute to shifts in power and status. Such power structures often reflect colonial legacies (Nada et al., 2023; Sah & Fang, 2025), as well as issues of class, gender, racialisation, ableism, or their intersections (Cioè-Peña et al., 2025). At the same time, language policy in practice does not necessarily correspond to or align with formal university policies (Baker & Hüttner, 2019; Mortensen, 2014), but is mediated by academic staff as well as the students themselves. This mediation often involves students exercising agency in their language choices, navigating institutional expectations, and reacting to perceived social norms (Sung, 2022). This process can be understood as a form of individual language management, where students actively reframe language rapport and usage to align with their own identities and goals (Nguyen, 2019).

The multilingual settings that students navigate and participate in during their mobility are characterised by considerable complexity. To capture some of the complexities with relevance to higher education in Europe, the students and study abroad contexts described in our data involve not only English, but also European languages with a comparatively strong status as international lingua franca (what Ammon, 2012 calls 'second rank'

languages), as well as languages whose status is mainly linked to their use at the national level, or (as in the case of Portuguese) within a limited number of countries.

Language learning, identity, and study abroad

The fields of applied linguistics (AL) and second language acquisition (SLA) have produced a substantial body of research on language learning during study abroad (SA). They offer both empirical and theoretical insights that complement the educational and policy perspectives outlined in the previous section. As Kinginger (2009) illustrates in a comprehensive review of SA research, the fields of AL and SLA have evolved from primarily measuring language proficiency gains to investigating the broader social, cultural, and ideological dimensions of language learning abroad. This evolution reflects a broader recognition that study abroad is not merely a context for linguistic development, but a socially complex environment in which language learning, identity negotiation, and power dynamics converge (Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2015).

Empirical research has demonstrated that study abroad can yield significant gains in oral proficiency, fluency, pragmatic competence, and sociolinguistic awareness (Isabelli-García et al., 2018). According to Bótas and Huisman (2013), students do frequently report progress in their communication in an international language following a period abroad, while Llanes et al. (2016) found significant gains in English competence from a study abroad sojourn. Similarly, King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) found that after studying abroad, most students listed 'foreign language improvement' among the most positively assessed dimensions of their international experiences. However, language improvement transcends mere grammatical competence, encompassing increased confidence in using the language in various contexts (Cadd, 2012; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018). Increased proficiency is not just a reflection of language immersion (Róg, 2017) but involves key elements such as communicative proficiency and personal confidence, which were also shown to increase as a result of study abroad experiences (Köylü & Borràs, 2024; Nada & Legutko, 2022). The process of language learning in a foreign country is intrinsically linked to the development of personal and cultural identity (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), since learning a language in a study abroad context involves navigating and negotiating different cultural norms and practices. This can lead to significant transformations in students' self-perception and cultural understanding (Sobkowiak, 2019; Teng et al., 2024).

However, the relationship between SA and language development is not linear. Research in SA has been consistently showing that the learning context alone does not determine outcomes: wider dimensions such as individual engagement, social networks, and even living arrangements tend to play decisive roles (Kinginger & Carnine, 2019; Kinginger & Wu, 2018). Furthermore, Kinginger (2009) challenges the "immersion myth" (the popular assumption that study abroad automatically produces fluent speakers), arguing instead that SA intensifies individual differences, with certain students thriving, while some may be struggling. Rather than merely being abroad, the quality and nature of social interactions, including the extent to which students develop close personal relationships with local community members, is also crucial for language development (Zhuang & Kinginger, 2024). While the proficiency in the local language or a commonly used lingua franca can facilitate deeper social connections and a more meaningful cultural experience (Wilczewski & Alon 2023),

limited language proficiency can lead to social isolation and a surface-level cultural understanding (Nada et al., 2022). As highlighted by Sobkowiak (2019), intercultural learning does not automatically result from merely sojourning in a context but requires communication and interaction.

Research on English as a lingua franca in study abroad contexts has been particularly relevant to understanding European mobility, where English frequently serves as the primary medium of communication among international students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in non-Anglophone settings (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022; Llanes et al., 2016). Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022) comparative study challenges the assumed superiority of Anglophone destinations for English language development. Their research demonstrates that English as a lingua franca in study abroad contexts—where students engage in multilingual environments in non-Anglophone countries—provide equally robust opportunities for linguistic development. These findings carry particular relevance for the present study, where the majority of participants navigated multilingual settings involving not only English, but also different local European languages.

Moreover, other insights from AL and SLA are particularly relevant in guiding the current study, as for instance, Norton's (2013) construct of language investment, further developed by Darvin and Norton (2015), which reframes language learning motivation as investment (a concept that recognises learners as having complex social identities and multiple desires). Language investment is hence positioned at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology, enabling the analysis of how structural forces shape individual language learning trajectories. This framework is especially relevant for understanding why the students in our study made particular language choices and how they experienced the value of their linguistic resources in different mobility contexts.

Kramsch's (2013) notion of the multilingual subject draws attention to the subjective, embodied, and affective dimensions of language use. For Kramsch, multilingual speakers navigate between symbolic systems and cultural meanings, occupying a fluid "third place" shaped by memories of other languages and desires for other identities. This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding the emotional dimensions of language use reported by our research participants—including feelings of frustrations, challenge, but also love for a language, and pride in developing new competences. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) work on identity negotiation in multilingual contexts further contributes to our theoretical framework by theorising identity construction as a dynamic process where speakers negotiate their sense of self in relation to their linguistic repertoires and the social contexts they inhabit. Block (2014) extends this analysis specifically to study abroad, arguing that SA offers significant potential for identity reconstruction as students navigate new and often unfamiliar contexts.

Jackson's (2008, 2016) research on study abroad has demonstrated that intercultural and linguistic development during SA is shaped by a complex interplay of individual characteristics and environmental factors. Her work highlights that language and intercultural learning are not guaranteed outcomes of mobility; rather, they depend on the quality of engagement with host communities, the development of diverse social networks, and individual openness to new ways of being (Du & Jackson, 2021; Jackson, 2016). These findings underscore the importance of analysing different dimensions of the study abroad experience, such as living arrangements, peer interactions, and institutional structures that may facilitate or constrain meaningful engagement and language development.

Synthesis

In sum, Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework guiding this study, which brings together five key concepts to examine the relationship between language and mobility. First, the global language system (De Swaan, 2013) conceptualises languages as hierarchically organised from peripheral to hypercentral, helping to explain patterns of student mobility. Second, linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) frames languages as forms of symbolic capital whose value shifts across contexts. Third, language ideologies (Kroskrity, 2004) highlight how beliefs about language shape hierarchies and institutional practices. Fourth, language investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013) links language learning to identity, ideology, and access to resources. Finally, the multilingual subject (Kramsch, 2013) draws attention to the emotional and subjective dimensions of language use. Together, these concepts reflect and support a broader shift within second language acquisition and applied linguistics away from a focus on proficiency towards the social and ideological dimensions of language learning (Jackson, 2008, 2016; Kinginger, 2009, 2015). In this perspective, study abroad is understood as a complex environment in which factors such as living arrangements, peer interactions, and institutional structures play a crucial role in shaping opportunities for meaningful engagement and language development.

Materials and methods

To analyse the role of language in the context of international student mobility, both regarding academic experiences and social interaction with other students and locals, we draw on data from two distinct research studies:

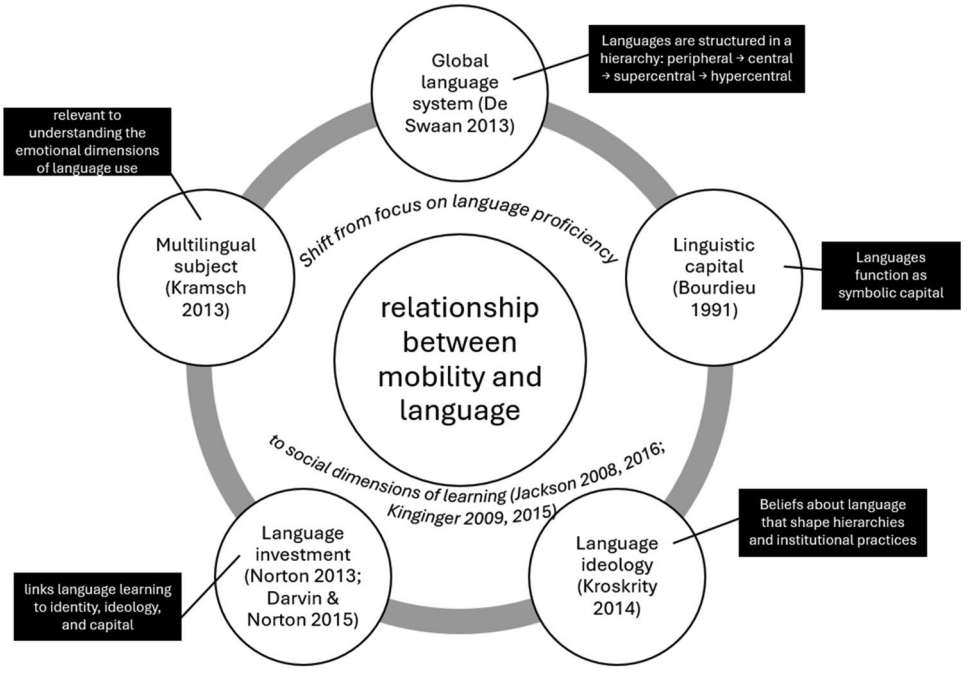


Figure 1. Theoretical framework to study the relationship between mobility and language.

- **Study 1** focused on the lived experiences of twelve international degree-seeking students in Portugal. These participants were recruited through personal networks and social media contacts, following the maximum variation sampling technique (Koerber & McMichael, 2008), to ensure diverse perspectives, with differences in nationality, age, ethnicity, study level, faculty, university, and gender. These students were interviewed in-depth, following a narrative approach (Nada, 2023). The interviews started with a generative narrative question (Riemann & Schütze, 1987): *Please recount your life from the moment in which you started to nurture the idea of going abroad*, to let participants recount their mobility experiences of their own accord, and only ask for clarifications and further elaboration when needed. No other pre-established questions were hence elaborated, but a set of topics that could be explored during students' narrations, including the role of language in the context of international mobility. Among the other topics initially considered were motivations for studying abroad; culture shock; interactions with locals and other international students; satisfaction with host institutions; or future plans.
- **Study 2** focused on nine international credit mobility students who undertook an Erasmus mobility in a variety of countries (France, Italy, Norway, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom). These students were recruited through a convenience sampling approach, as the first author was working within an institutional setting where he was often in touch with Erasmus alumni. These students were interviewed following a semi-structured interview guide focused on several dimensions of the experience of being an internationally mobile (Erasmus) student.

The analysis presented in this paper draws on interviews with a total of 21 international students. While all interviews covered diverse aspects of the international experience, the issue of language constituted a core dimension of the data collection process, and was explicitly approached through previously formulated questions in the case of Study 2. In the case of Study 1, since no previously elaborated interview guide was used, follow-up questions were asked to better understand students' experiences concerning language, such as: *Can you please elaborate more on how language mattered in your experience inside and outside the classroom? Can you explain how learning a new language was tied to your intention to study abroad?* In both studies, reflections on language also emerged spontaneously multiple times during the interviews when discussing other aspects of participants' mobility experience.

Capturing experiences of both degree and credit mobility students was seen as a way to enrich the discussion on language in international student mobility settings, while at the same time avoiding essentialist understandings of international students. Certainly, degree and credit mobility can constitute very distinct experiences, especially due to the time period spent abroad. Nevertheless, language tends to be a pivotal dimension of both types of international experiences. The fact that the participant set included students enrolled in different levels permitted to capture a wider range of student perspectives, since the type of experience of studying and living in a foreign country can vary from undergraduate to Masters and PhD students (cf. Zhao & Ma, 2024). Combining two data sets additionally allowed to increase the qualitative solidity of the analysis, as well as the size and complexity of the empirical corpus.

All interviews were conducted either in English or Portuguese. Relevant excerpts mobilised in this article were translated into English by the authors. All interviews were in-person,

lasted more than one hour, and were recorded and manually transcribed by the first author to ensure accuracy and allow greater familiarity with the data. In total, approx. 80 h of recorded material were transcribed (participants in Study 1 were interviewed more than once, to allow for a deeper biographical exploration of their international mobility narratives). Participation in both studies was voluntary and, before the recording, all participants signed an informed consent form, which specified the voluntary character of their participation, the researchers' commitment to safeguard their anonymity, as well as participants' right to withdraw from the study at any moment. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to refer to the participants. More information on the research participants and their international student profiles is provided in Table 1 below.

As can be seen in Table 1, the international students we interviewed represent a wide range of situations, origins, ages and educational backgrounds. However, almost all participants were enrolled in humanities and social sciences degrees, with a few studying letters and specifically languages. While the level of local language proficiency is unknown, this could be inferred by researchers from the interview data, which provides useful background information to readers when consulting the results of the data analysis. While some participants had a single experience of study abroad, others had more than one international mobility experience.

The data were analysed using a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on identifying recurrent themes and patterns in the students' accounts (Cho & Lee, 2014). An inductive and latent approach was primarily employed, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined. We were interested in the underlying ideas of the student narratives and how they related to language issues during the sojourn abroad. Having identified the meaning units related to our research aim (the interview passages that deal with an issue related to language), we collected them in a table and proceeded to condense them into shorter meaning units (Bengtsson, 2016) that express the main idea of the interviewees' statements. We first coded the data openly, assigning codes to each condensed meaning unit. When re-reading the 83 meaning units, they were coded using 38 codes that were grouped into four overarching themes, which are presented in the Results section below. The analysis focused on language use and language choice, as well as how these are interrelated with language competence and proficiency. Interview excerpts are presented to illustrate how language ideologies in the host communities and institutions—as well as the various situational dynamics that the students encountered—interacted with their own beliefs and values concerning language (cf. Spolsky, 2009) and their language competence.

Results

The findings paint a vivid picture of how language shapes international students' mobility experiences, revealing four interwoven themes. First, students described language proficiency, the perceived utility of certain languages, and their accompanying emotions as key motivators in their decisions to pursue mobility. These are aspects best understood through the concepts of language investment and global language system, which together explain how languages are valued and pursued within global hierarchies. Second, they emphasised how they navigated social and academic interactions, negotiating language use and the linguistic ideologies embedded in each context. The concept of a multilingual subject is particularly useful in

Table 1. Research participants' details.

Student	Gender and age	Country of origin	Country of mobility and inferred level of local language proficiency	Study cycle and discipline	Language of interview
Aiko	Female 40+	Japan	Portugal (intermediate)	Bachelor's (Letters)	Portuguese
Alfonso	Male 20+	Spain	Portugal (intermediate)	Master's (Sports)	Portuguese
Amivi	Female 30+	East Timor	Portugal (intermediate)	Bachelor's (Law)	Portuguese
Arianna	Female 20+	Italy	UK and France (intermediate in both English and French)	Bachelor's and Master's (Letters)	English
Brenda	Female 20+	US	Portugal (intermediate)	Master's (Letters)	English
Chang	Male 20+	China	Portugal (intermediate)	Master's (Economy)	Portuguese
Charlotte	Female 20+	France	UK and Norway (intermediate in English and beginner in Norwegian)	Bachelor's (Political Science)	English
Corina	Female 30+	Moldova	Portugal (intermediate)	Master's (Education)	Portuguese
Donata	Female 20+	Lithuania	Italy (beginner)	Bachelor's (Letters)	English
Gerhard	Male 20+	Netherlands	UK (advanced)	Bachelor's (History)	English
Jaidev	Male 20+	India	Portugal (beginner)	PhD (Arts)	English
Janica	Female 20+	Croatia	France (advanced)	Master's (Letters)	English
Karolina	Female 20+	UK	France and Spain (intermediate in both French and Spanish)	Bachelor's (Multilingual Studies and International Relations)	English
Laina	Female (trans) 30+	Laos	Japan and Portugal (beginner in both Japanese and Portuguese)	Master's and PhD (Sociology)	English
Liidia	Female 30+	Estonia	Italy (beginner)	Bachelor's (European Studies)	English
Megan	Female 20+	Ireland	France (beginner)	Bachelor's (Law)	English
Naim	Male 20+	Turkey	Portugal (intermediate)	Master's (Social Sciences)	Portuguese
Rita	Female 20+	São Tomé	Portugal (native speaker)	Bachelor's (Dental Medicine)	Portuguese
Santiago	Male 20+	Spain	Turkey – twice (beginner)	Bachelor's and Master's (Letters)	English
Tânia	Female 30+	Angola	Portugal (native speaker)	Master's (Social Sciences)	Portuguese
Valéria	Female 40+	Brazil	Portugal (native speaker)	PhD (Education)	Portuguese

capturing those negotiations. Third, research participants explained how the language of instruction influenced their academic experiences, shaping access to coursework, relationships with faculty, and overall learning experiences. The role of the language of instruction in shaping academic access and relationships can be analysed through both the theories of linguistic capital and the global language system, showing how institutional contexts assign value to

particular linguistic resources. Finally, they reflected on their evolving sense of language competence, noting perceived gains as well as the complex emotions and strategies connected to language use that surfaced throughout their mobility trajectories. That sense is illuminated by the concepts of multilingual subject and language investment, which foreground the identity-related and affective dimensions of language learning.

Language proficiency, perceived utility, and feelings as motivators in mobility choice

The participants' accounts reveal that their linguistic backgrounds, including proficiency in certain languages and the perceived usefulness of others, significantly influenced their decisions regarding international student mobility. Furthermore, students' feelings and emotional connections to languages also played a role in their choices.

Some international students motivated their international mobility with their competence in a particular language. For example, Gerhard chose the UK because English was the only foreign language that he felt comfortable in:

> Gerhard: I did not experience any language barrier, and that is actually the main reason why I chose an English-speaking country, because English, apart from my native language, was at the time the one and only language I felt comfortable enough in.

Other students made some apparently less rational choices when it comes to the host country, albeit very much connected to the factor of language and its affective appeal:

> Brenda: I went to visit a few times, and I really fell in love with Portugal. I'd been wanting to learn the language for a long time, just because I heard it in a movie and I thought it sounded cool.

> Aiko: I came to Portugal because of the Portuguese language. (…) When you're in love with someone, you can't explain [why]. My relationship with the language is the same. I fell in love with the Portuguese language.

Aiko's and Brenda's accounts reflect what Kramsch (2013) theorises as desire for language learning, when the engagement with a foreign language often exceeds purely instrumental motivations. As illustrated in their accounts, these students are drawn to languages not as commodities but as objects of emotional attachment, highlighting that the relationship between language and mobility goes beyond utilitarian calculations.

The choice to go on mobility to a certain country was also linked to the perceived utility of a language. Among the participants, this aspect was particularly visible in the case of Portuguese:

> Naim: After finishing my degree in Turkey, I decided to have an experience outside the country for the first time. (…) I did this to develop language [skills] and also to meet people from other cultures from other countries. In addition to English, I wanted to learn one more language spoken by many people, like French or Spanish. (…) Portuguese, I think, is the sixth most spoken language in the world, so Portugal was an alternative.

> Chang: I had a boss who told me that this language was good in the future and recommended [me to] learn this language. In the end, after thinking about and consulting the information on the Internet, I also thought that the Portuguese language brought more advantages in the future. First, I chose the language and, after deciding on the Portuguese language, I started studying it [in China] and then decided to go to Portugal.

These accounts suggest that instrumental language ideologies, which link language learning to tangible benefits like career advancement (Darvin & Norton, 2015), can be powerful motivators for moving abroad and learning a new language. Through the lens of Norton's (2013) investment theory, these accounts reveal that language learning can be understood as acquiring symbolic or material resources that will increase international students' value in future professional markets. Chang's account, in particular, illustrates how language choices are shaped by the perceived positioning of languages within what De Swaan (2013) conceptualises as the global language system, where students assess the communicative value and market potential of different languages. This perception of utility reflects broader hierarchical perceptions of languages within what Mitchell and Güvendir (2023) identify as a geopolitical linguistic order. They argue that student mobility choices reproduce a hierarchy with English at its centre, reinforcing its position through the very act of choosing study destinations. Yet, this hierarchical model is not necessarily deterministic. Personal relationships, cultural encounters, and growing awareness and appreciation of linguistic diversity can disrupt purely instrumental orientations towards language learning, as also seen in the interview data.

Language use in social and academic contexts: navigating interactions and ideologies

The students' experiences of language use during mobility were shaped by various factors including their proficiency, the perceived language ideologies in different settings, and the nature of their interactions with both locals and other international students. These experiences, in turn, had impacts on their feelings about language and their sense of integration.

When describing how language affected their social situations, several of the international students reported that the use of the local language was more challenging when interacting with locals (see Szczepaniak-Kozak et al., 2022). Some students regretted that locals lost interest in what they said because they were not able to express themselves effectively. Others felt that communication in the local language did not do justice to their personality (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016), since it often takes too long to formulate a sentence and contribute to the conversation.

> Aiko: I'm speaking Portuguese, but I'm communicating something else. (…) In my interaction with Portuguese, the conversation stopped many times for this [reason]. It stopped, and I felt bad and frustrated.

> Brenda: And my personality doesn't come through as much; I can't make jokes as much, so people might think that I'm boring or that I don't want to talk to them because I don't say much.

Such experiences demonstrate how language barriers could lead to feelings of frustration and social isolation. From the perspective of Kramsch's (2013) multilingual subject, these accounts reveal the embodied tension of inhabiting a language that cannot yet express one's full subjectivity (the gap between who students feel they are and who they can perform linguistically). At the same time, our data show that even a high language proficiency does not always guarantee meaningful interaction with local communities, as Janica's account indicates.

> Janica: I had very little contact with local students. (…) It was very hard even though I was trying to approach them. I was speaking French, so there were no language barriers. But no, it just did not happen.

On the other hand, communication in the local language seemed to be more straightforward with other internationals. Karolina's and Janica's experiences reveal that communicating with other international students in the local language was perceived as being less daunting than engaging in conversations with native speakers.

> Karolina: It is a lot easier to speak to non-natives! So, in Spain, it was a lot easier for me to speak to Italians in Spanish than to my Spanish-speaking flatmates. It was like with native speakers, I felt a lot more pressure to be correct! With Erasmus people, you know you are going to make mistakes. So, you just speak a lot more freely!

This finding resonates with research on English as a lingua franca in study abroad contexts, where the absence of native-speaker pressure creates communicative environments that participants experience as less deficiency-oriented and more focused on mutual meaning-making (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018).

Stereotypes also mediated the language learning process, motivating participants to improve their existing language skills or learn an entirely new language. The students used language choice in interactions as a way to counter stereotypes and assert a certain identity, although different students positioned themselves differently. The following statements show how international students insisted on speaking the local language to counteract stereotypes about their own countries.

> Brenda: I'm rejecting the idea of being a regular expat. Especially coming from the US, there is this stereotype that we don't learn other languages and we only speak English, and I don't like that. Even if I speak English here, then people would just assume that that's all that I can speak, and then I have to be like: 'No, I speak German too'; it's kind of a selfish thing, but also, I try to represent my country well.

> Alfonso: Another thing that people said to me: 'The Spaniards come here, only speak Spanish, do not want to know anything about Portuguese' (…) It's a matter of respect, a person goes to another country and doesn't want to impose their rules, and in even less language, it gives a bad image of that person's country.

In these accounts, the impetus to learn a local language transcended personal growth, evolving into a mission to reshape stereotypes associated with their national identities, demonstrating active agency in identity construction (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). As Kinginger (2015) observes, mobile students frequently discover "their own image in the eyes of their hosts" (p. 7) and may hence feel compelled to contest or reshape that image through certain linguistic choices and strategies.

Sojourners' ways of interacting and using certain languages also related to residential choices. Sojourners chose to live with 'co-nationals', 'other outsiders' or 'locals'. According to our participants' experience, living with 'locals' allowed for more local language use, while living alone or with 'co-nationals' or 'other outsiders' reduced opportunities to use the local language.

> Karolina: It does make a difference where you live because, in France, I had my own room; it was a block away from where all the Erasmus people lived. So that's when you are living in your own room (…) and you are kind of alone. Whereas in Spain I shared a flat with four other people who came from completely different countries as well, but one of them was Chilean who did not

> speak any English so we were forced in the flat to speak Spanish! So, it makes such a big difference linguistically!
>
> Charlotte: For me in Norway for six months, I was with my boyfriend, so we lived together, so I have not really improved my English. Then, in Belfast, I was alone, and I was in the corridor with the Erasmus people.

Language use was additionally characterised by a constant negotiation between the use of English and the use of local languages. For instance, realising that locals were not fluent in English added to international students' motivation for learning the local language (Róg, 2017). Consequently, some international students were forced to develop communication strategies to interact with locals with whom they did not share a lingua franca (Fidan & Karatepe, 2021). By contrast, among student sojourners, English often acted as the lingua franca (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016) and was much more important for these students than the local language.

> Janica: In my Erasmus bubble, we were speaking in English because, basically, when we were in France, I was the only one who spoke French or had a very high level of conversational French. So, we spoke English exclusively.
>
> Karolina: In France, with Erasmus people, we would speak English, (…) very little French, unfortunately! You had to try to pop that bubble, but it did not really work.

The dominance of English as a lingua franca among international students thus sometimes impacted the depth of cultural immersion and interaction with locals (Köylü & Borràs, 2024). Nevertheless, in certain situations, English became less important than local languages, even for communication among international students. For instance, Karolina, who experienced two mobilities, one in France and another in Spain, had distinct experiences when it came to the language used to interact with other international students. Whereas in France she had not been able to speak French with the Erasmus students, in Spain she experienced a different situation:

> Karolina: In Spain, we spoke a lot of Spanish. There was basically no English amongst the Erasmus people. And it might have had a lot to do with the fact that half of the Erasmus students were Italian and did not speak English. So, it was a lot easier for them to speak Spanish.
>
> Donata: Finally, a bigger part of my Erasmus group was pushing for Italian. About 60% of those who wanted to speak Italian were from all over - Greece, France, whatever. And there were about 20-30% who wanted to speak in English. So, we would always have this mix of both, like at the end of the day, we were speaking English/Italian.

As illustrated in these examples, the process of finding a lingua franca in interactions with 'other outsiders' took place on a group level, and English was not always the preferred language. This highlights the emergent and negotiated nature of language practices in multilingual peer groups (Mortensen, 2014, Doiz et al., 2014).

Language impacts on academic experiences

Similarly, the role of English as the medium of instruction in the academic setting was subject to negotiations and situational constraints, which can be understood in relation to both

global language system (De Swaan, 2013) and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Several of the participants had chosen to go on mobility because they were told their courses would be taught in English, a hypercentral language with high linguistic capital. However, upon arrival, the language of schooling was often adapted to local students' needs, even if the course was advertised to be in English and not in the local language. Consequently, these international students were not able to follow classes, a situation documented in other recent studies (Fidan & Karatepe, 2021).

> Donata: I speak English, and I speak zero Italian. I enrolled in the English Phenology Programme, right? I come to my first class; the teacher comes to me and says: 'Well, these are the first-year students, and they do not have any level of English! So, unfortunately, I have to teach the whole course in Italian; I hope you follow.' No, I cannot [follow]! Because I do not speak Italian!

> Laina: I can say I was quite disappointed with the education system because I was told in the application that all classes would be conducted in English, but when I arrived, we got into the classroom, and every teacher asked: 'What language do we use in the class?'; and everybody said Portuguese. (…) I felt disappointed and sad about it because I would have loved to have had the opportunity to understand what was being taught in the class, which is actually very important for my research.

The discrepancies between expected and actual languages of instruction significantly affected the academic engagement and success of these students, demonstrating how access to knowledge is mediated by the (mis-)alignment between students' linguistic capital and institutional language practices. In the academic context, adequate language proficiency in the medium of instruction facilitated the experience of having university courses, whereas limited language proficiency proved a challenge to participation in classes.

> Arianna: Maybe because I knew the language and most of the classes I was attending were in French. (…) There was no language struggle, so it definitely helped.

> Liidia: It was difficult to follow, even though I was attending Italian classes. But still, [I had] bigger struggles in big lectures! I mean, I was able to separate the words, but then, if you focus on the language, you cannot really get the content.

Laina's account, based on a comparison of two international experiences, one in Japan and one in Portugal, clearly indicates the importance of understanding and communicating in the language of instruction.

> Laina: If you ask me where I gained more in terms of education, I would say I gained more when I was in Japan because of this language issue. In Japan, we spoke in English, and I understood many things about my classes compared to here [in Portugal].

Beyond comprehension, linguistic capital also shaped students' ability to engage in key academic practices. In Brenda's case, proficiency affected the way she could intervene in seminars and limited her participation (cf. Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016).

> Brenda: I remember we had a class in which each one of us had an article, and the teacher wanted us to summarise it but, at the same time, talk about it and give our opinion on it. So, we had to do a little presentation, and mine was too much of a summary for the teacher: 'You summarised it, but now can you please expand, say what you thought about it?'. And I was like: 'No'. (…) and I started crying then (…) because I couldn't think of what to say in Portuguese.

It was also common for the students to use at least two languages in the academic setting, which added an additional layer of complexity to their experience:

> Chang: Some teachers take the exam in English, but the classes are in Portuguese, and then I have to cope with two languages. I have some difficulties in coping with the two languages because, for me, the two are foreign languages.

> Naim: In the second half, for the presentations, I prepared the PowerPoint [presentation] only in Portuguese, and I said everything in English: language mix. I was always preparing like this. So, I was going to say something for half an hour, in English, and they wouldn't understand anything. It was ridiculous. So, to overcome this, I worked with two languages.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how academic language practices are shaped by tensions between global language hierarchies and local linguistic realities, and how students must continuously negotiate the value and usability of their linguistic capital when engaging with both English and local languages in higher education contexts.

Overall language competence: perceived improvement and affective responses

The students' reflections on their overall language competence development during mobility encompass perceived improvements, as well as a spectrum of emotions ranging from enthusiasm to frustration. Improvement in overall language skills is often reported by students (Bótas & Huisman, 2013), along with increased confidence in their target language (Fidan & Karatepe, 2021; Róg, 2017). The interview material of the present study also provided numerous examples, and the students enthusiastically described feelings of happiness, confidence, and pride in functioning in a new language. These experiences can be understood through the lens of multilingual subject (Kramsch, 2013), which highlights the emotional and subjective dimensions of language use.

> Karolina: I did not speak a lot of French, but it did give me more confidence. Let's say I felt a lot more comfortable in French after the Erasmus.

> Megan: A lot of exams were oral exams [in France], which you do not have at home [in Ireland]. It was also [important] for me to be able to talk about Law in French in a confident way!

Another participant, a native English speaker, noted the importance of challenging oneself to speak in a foreign language rather than 'choosing the easy way' and simply relying on English, illustrating an active investment in language learning:

> Brenda: Doing a particular thing in a foreign language would be harder or more complicated. But I want to do it because it's a good challenge, and afterwards, I can be proud of myself for doing it in a foreign language.

Other accounts provide insights into the diverse expectations of international students when it comes to language learning, for instance, the happiness experienced when dreaming, for the first time, in English, an experience that reflects deeper identification with the language:

> Charlotte: In English, I improved. I was so happy at the end. I could speak English, and it was one of my main goals in life. Like I [even] had a dream in English; I was so happy.

Inversely, Donata's account illustrates an experience that did not correspond to her expectations, as she recounts her struggles with Italian, a language necessary for her academic engagement during her international mobility, yet one in which her proficiency was insufficient. This highlights how uneven access to linguistic resources can constrain students' ability to realise their language investment:

> Donata: I did not improve my Italian because [the course in] English Literature [was] taught in Italian! So, I did not have the vocabulary for that, so that was very frustrating!

Here, a palpable motivation for acquiring new linguistic skills coexisted with challenges stemming from limited language proficiency. In the interviews, enthusiasm and positive affect towards the language learning experience were thus expressed, alongside some feelings of frustration. Such emotional responses reported by students are not only side-effects of their international sojourns, but are central to their identity formation processes (Tian & McCafferty, 2021) as learners continuously negotiate their positions as multilingual subjects across different contexts.

Discussion: the role of language in the international student experience

In the context of international student mobility, our findings show how language shapes the student experience in academic contexts and within social interactions with other students and locals, and how it affects their participation in various contexts (cf. Teng et al., 2024).

Ahead of their sojourn, some languages were perceived to be useful and, therefore, motivated the choice of the destination country and the courses or programmes attended. This instrumental orientation aligns with Mitchell and Güvendir (2023) theorisation of hierarchical perceptions of languages, where destination choices reflect internalised valuations of languages within global power structures.

During their sojourn, the students navigated numerous kinds of multilingual settings during their sojourn. The choice of language in different situations firstly depended on which (if any) shared languages were available to the students. Secondly, formal constraints in the academic settings imposed certain language choices (cf. Spolsky, 2009), although a few examples were found in the interview material of teachers and students changing the language to accommodate the majority of students on a course. Thirdly, in situations where formal constraints did not exist, the choice of language for communication was linked to a diverse set of considerations (cf. Baker & Hüttner, 2019). The language choice was often motivated by the students' desire to develop their language proficiency and skills. In some cases, it depended on the group composition and group dynamics in the 'transient' social configurations (Mortensen et al., 2024), while in others it depended on prevailing language ideologies and personal desires, such as the wish to break negative stereotypes.

The interviews provided examples of how the study abroad experience unfolds within an evolving ecology of language use where traditional distinctions between native and non-native speaker contexts have become increasingly blurred. As highlighted by Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022), contexts in which English is used by international students as lingua franca can foster a "low-anxiety atmosphere" (p. 1330) that enables students to actively rely and improve their English, unconstrained by native-speaker ideologies. Our data indicates that similar types of low-anxiety linguistic atmospheres appear when local languages are

spoken between international students, with positive effects on their proficiency and sense of cultural integration.

The experiences of these students and the positive or negative ways they valued them were integral to their evolving linguistic and social identities. Their accounts reflect a constant negotiation between their existing linguistic capital (cf. Bótas & Huisman, 2013; Bourdieu, 1991), the demands of new environments, and their personal aspirations. Although the students may have found themselves in positions of relative weakness due to lacking cultural skills and proficiency in the local languages or medium of instruction, choosing a study setting that would challenge them to leave their comfort zones was also a significant part of why they decided to go on mobility. As suggested by Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022), the willingness to leave one's comfort zone constitutes indeed a core element of language learning. Reasons for learning the local language notably comprised the willingness to represent one's own country and to better integrate with the locals (cf. Róg, 2017). While some students expressed that they did not fully benefit from opportunities to interact with locals and develop their language skills, overall, they nevertheless appeared happy about the progress they had achieved.

Our data indicate that the mobility experience gave the student sojourners a perceived sense of improvement in their language skills and a boost in confidence in using a foreign language. The area where the most tensions appeared in the interview material was with respect to their academic studies, where the international students had relatively less agency to influence how courses were taught and examined. In interactions with fellow students, the language of communication appeared to be determined by group dynamics, and might not have corresponded to their own preferences.

Finally, in line with earlier research (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022; Llanes et al., 2016), the student experiences reported in the interviews suggest that English played a significant role for the students, even in mobility contexts where interest in another language had motivated the destination. Both the function of English as an academic language (Dafouz & Smit, 2021; Hughes, 2008) and as a lingua franca in various communicative situations was clearly discernible, further reflecting its hypercentral position within global language hierarchies (De Swaan 2013).

Concluding remarks

The present study examined international students' experiences and reflections on how language affects or is affected by the mobility experience. The analysis suggests that the study abroad experience enhances language skills and fosters a sense of confidence and pride in navigating new linguistic landscapes. Language served as both a tool and a barrier, shaping academic success, social integration, and personal development. Choice of destination and courses was affected by language proficiency and perceived language utility, where—as also underlined in much of the literature - English appeared as a highly valued language. Who the students interacted with, the language(s) used for communication, and how the students felt about the interaction depended on students' motivation and proficiency, but also on opportunities linked to institutional arrangements. Ultimately, the international students actively constructed and negotiated their linguistic and social identities, exercising agency within the structural opportunities and constraints of their mobility experiences, mediated by complex language ideologies and interactional dynamics.

Furthermore, consistent with Kinginger's (2009) critique of the "immersion myth", our findings demonstrate that study abroad does not automatically produce linguistic or intercultural gains. Rather, outcomes depend on the quality of social interaction, the nature of living arrangements (Kinginger & Carnine, 2019; Kinginger & Wu, 2018), and students' own agency in navigating the complex linguistic ecologies they encounter (Jackson, 2008, 2016).

Findings have several pedagogical implications for supporting language learning in study-abroad contexts. Pre-departure orientation programmes could play a crucial role in preparing students for the diverse languages and linguistic practices they may encounter. The interviews notably pointed to cases of student frustration caused by discrepancies between expected and actual languages of instruction at the host institutions. By helping students anticipate such eventualities, pre-departure orientation programmes can better equip them to make strategic choices that more closely align with their educational and linguistic goals, and to adjust expectations to realities on the ground. Raising awareness about the diverse linguistic practices students will encounter, including English as a lingua franca contexts, multilingual academic spaces, and local language variations, could also prepare prospective international students to navigate and value linguistic diversity beyond native-speaker norms.

Our study points to the significance of students' living arrangements, where higher education institutions could facilitate affordable accommodation with locals to support language and intercultural development opportunities. Considering the importance of social interaction and experiences of local life and culture in international students' narratives, events dedicated to local students and wider communities should actively include international students, increasing opportunities for intercultural and multilingual interaction, to enrich international students' intercultural learning, social participation, and maximise the linguistic and cultural benefits of their sojourn. Host institutions could additionally encourage and provide guidance on how to seek out meaningful interactions with locals. While living in an "international bubble" can provide opportunities for intercultural interaction, contact with the local communities is particularly valued and sought out by international students.

Despite the rich insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The findings rely primarily on retrospective and self-reported experiences gathered through interviews. Additionally, the sample includes a limited number of mobile students whose motivations, backgrounds, linguistic repertoires, and host environments may not be representative of other international mobility contexts. Future research could therefore rely on wider and more diverse samples, while incorporating ethnographic and/or longitudinal methods to observe language use in real time, compare mobility experiences across diverse institutional and national settings, and examine how evolving language policies influence international students' experiences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was co-funded through the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, IP (FCT), under the Scientific Employment Stimulus Individual Programme (C. Nada – 2023.09119.CEECIND; CEECIND/00433/2018).

ORCID

Justyna Legutko http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7193-5047

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