



# International Student's Real Life Speaking Experience in The United Kingdom

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**Abstract.** This study explored international students' real life speaking experiences during their study in a United Kingdom university. More specifically, this study is intended to understand their speaking challenges and to elicit their reflections on speaking experiences. To achieve the purpose of the study, qualitative study with case study approach was employed. Four international master students from Thailand, China, Tibet and Indonesia participated in this study. The results of the study revealed that international students experienced a plethora of speaking challenges, such as understanding accented-speech, lack of vocabulary and language expressions, experiencing speaking anxiety, and the issues on personality and speakers' rate of speech. Despite the challenges they experienced, based on their reflections, they obtained some advantages from their speaking experiences with native and/or local people, including vocabulary and listening skill improvement, being more confident to speak, and having more understanding of locals' spoken language expressions such as idioms.

**Keywords:** Case study · Challenges · International Students · Reflection · Qualitative

## 1 Introduction

The discussion on international students is a never-ending discussion. There are always new perspectives that researchers bring to the table. To date, the topic on international students has been the focus of a growing body of empirical work, including the issue of international students' speaking experience. For instance, explored graduate students' speaking experiences at one university in the United Kingdom. His research focused on the speaking challenges faced by international students both inside the classroom and university-surrounding settings and the strategies to alleviate the challenges. His study revealed that international students experienced a plethora of barriers in communication, including language-related issues, individual factors and cultural differences. He also found that international students applied communication strategies to alleviate their barriers in communication both inside and outside of the classroom in the university environment. In a different study, [1] investigated East Asian international students' strategies to alleviate and overcome their communication barriers caused by accented

English. The study found that international students employed both verbal (e.g., focusing on pronunciation and reading aloud) and non-verbal (e.g., having self-confidence) strategies. A more current research, [2] examined the challenges of Libyans' international students in academic speaking. Their findings indicated that international students were reluctant to engage in academic discourse because of their incompetence in academic skills and lack of prior speaking practices. Some other research [3–6] also discussed international students' speaking experiences.

Although many previous studies have provided valuable and comprehensive explanations on the issues of international students' speaking barriers and their overcoming strategies, none of the studies discussed their reflection from speaking experiences and challenges. Based on the gap in previous studies, this study attempted to not only explore international students' speaking challenges, but also to elicit their reflection on speaking challenges, particularly the benefit they obtained from speaking with native and/or local people. Furthermore, this study provided the exploration of international students' speaking experiences in real life context which covered both speaking in academic and non-academic contexts.

## 2 Method

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative method with a case study approach was employed in the study. [7] define qualitative research method as a way to organise and interpret data, and it focuses on the smaller number of participants to recognise the main issues in more details than that of quantitative research. [8] also states that qualitative study is able to probe and demonstrate sensitive contexts by persuading the participants to show their insights in relation to linguistics and sociocultural settings. This method is effective to find out the truth from people who are involved in academic contexts as they can share their views and experiences as a depiction of a particular situation [9–12]. Moreover, a case study is one of qualitative traditions which aims to comprehensively describe and analyse a case or a bounded system [13]. According to [14], the participants in the qualitative research, including case study, can be selected based on what needs to be acquired in research. For those reasons, this method was considered the appropriate and convenient way to conduct this study. In relation to that, the purposes of the study were to investigate speaking experiences both inside and outside of university encountered by the international students in Belfast. Therefore, by using this qualitative method with a case study approach, the issues were more explorable and interpretative with their actual words [10, 13].

The participants were selected with the purposive sampling method in this study. Purposive sampling method is the most often and dominant procedure used in qualitative approach in choosing participants, geographical sites and particular objects since it can provide rich and detailed information to help researchers in answering research questions [7, 13, 15]. The participants comprised four international students from different countries. The reasons for choosing these participants were that they were international students, non-native speakers, living in Belfast for study purposes, they took a full-time master's study programme, and English was categorised as a foreign language in their home countries. They were (pseudonym) *James* (Thailand), *Sun* (China), *Angel* (Tibet),

and *Rose* (Indonesia). Their experiences living and studying in Belfast for a year were believed to offer enough information and responses regarding their issues in speaking experiences.

The method in collecting the qualitative data in the study was a face-to-face interview with open-ended questions due to the accessibility of the participants. [16] points out that the participants can consciously provide detailed information of their experiences and behaviours from the beginning until the end, and provide access for researchers to understand their behaviours in an interview. Interviews can also be administered anonymously and gives opportunity to clarify the answers of the participants, although they are time consuming and take a great effort to prepare, to conduct and to transcribe [15, 16]. Nonetheless, conducting interviews in a study is flexible, accessible, and appropriate with sensitive issues, and researchers can have rich and detailed data and control how much data they should obtain. In preparing the interview, the researchers designed an interview guide. It aims to build the comfort of the participants in following the interview process [17]. The interview was conducted in English for approximately 30–60 min. The data obtained from the interview was completely recorded by an audio recorder featured in an iPhone since it could be conveniently taken to the interview locations.

In analysing the data, we employed thematic analysis [17]. It is an accessible and systematic analysis generated by codes and themes to capture the relevant data which answer the research questions. We began the analysis by familiarising the data. Then, we generated initial data coding, searched the themes, reviewed and defined the themes. The final step of data analysis was producing the report.

To allow the credibility, one of the trustworthiness criteria suggested by [18], in obtaining the data accuracy in this research, the participants were asked to verify whether the audio recorder was played at the time of the interviews and whether the audio recorder captured their voices clearly; and they were also asked to read the interview transcriptions to match what they had spoken in the process of data collection [19].

### 3 Research Findings

Through thematic analysis, from the data of interviews, we identified two main themes. The first theme is the speaking experiences at the university context and the second is speaking experiences outside of the university setting. In the explanation of each theme, we provide the data of the challenges and benefit from participants' speaking experiences.

#### **International Students' Speaking Experiences at the University-Surrounded Setting**

The result of the analysis indicated that the first theme relates to university context. What it means by university context is the context in both inside and outside of the classroom in the university area. In this context, the participants shared that they experienced several challenges. One prevalent issue in classroom context is the difficulty in understanding local students and lecturers' accents. Regarding this, all participants acknowledged that it somehow affected their understanding of the materials discussed in the classroom. *Rose*, for instance, shared that she found it challenging to speak with the

local students in the classroom because of their particular accents. She stated, Having communication and discussion with Northern Irish students was not easy. They speak with their distinctive English-accent and I often could not understand their speaking at all. With a similar vein, *Angel* felt difficult in understanding the tutors' explanation in the classroom and one of her concerns was their accent. She precisely commented in her interview, In the class, I could not really understand the lesson. You know, when I started to listen to my tutor, I started to think, um...because of their thick and not common accent With a different story, James optimistically said that he did not have serious issues in the classroom communication, but still understanding unfamiliar accents was a bit challenging. He noted, I don't find it's a problem [communicating with classmates and tutors] except for new accents I heard. It helps me practise my accent; I mean listening and understanding other accents as well. These show that unfamiliar accents became a stumbling block for them to actively participate or communicate in the classroom.

Another issue is speaking anxiety. Three out of four participants addressed this issue. One participant from China, *Sun*, explained that she feels anxious to speak in front of people. She shared her experience when she was asked by her tutors in class. She said, I remember in a class of one of my tutors. He asked us about our experiences in different countries. When he asked me about my country, I [felt] nervous to speak, but I had to force myself to think and speak carefully because I didn't want to mislead my classmates or tutors. Similarly, *Angel* claimed that often felt anxious whenever she had to speak in the classroom. She specifically said, I got... it's really, I'm really nervous, and I um... I find it uncomfortable to speak in front of others in the class. These indicate that some international students may experience the feeling of anxiety when speaking in an academic context.

The data of interviews indicated that lack of vocabulary is another concern for some international students from active participation in the classroom or university context. Regarding this, two participants acknowledged that they found it difficult to understand some vocabularies, especially informal vocabularies related to the cultural context. *Sun*, for instance, shared in her interview that she got confused with the vocabulary uttered by native students while joking in the classroom. She could not grasp any words and she did not know how to respond. She said, When I speak with Northern Irish, I could not understand their words and why they laughed. Similarly, *Rose* argued that her lack of cultural-related vocabulary caused her difficulty in understanding the tutors' jokes in the classroom. She shared, I once got blank inside the class listening to tutors' jokes because of my limited vocabulary on Northern Irish cultures. I did not find them funny, but all laughed. These interview data prove that vocabulary is a pivotal element in spoken communication. Lack of vocabulary may affect individuals' active participation.

The last challenge identified from the interview was personality. One of the participants, *Rose*, highlighted that her mood influenced her participation in the classroom activities. She said, My mood greatly affected my speaking inside the classroom. I could speak very fluently if I was in a good mood. On the other hand, if I was in a bad mood, I couldn't even say a word and suddenly went blank. Another participant, *Sun*, admitted that she is a shy person. She tended to be quiet and never spoke voluntarily. She specifically shared in her interview, I am a very shy and quiet person. I think these

[make] me reluctant to speak in the classroom. The participants' responses indicated that personality, in some context, does matter with speaking participation.

Aside from challenges, the participants acknowledged that they get some benefits from their speaking experiences inside the classroom. One of the significant advantages from the experiences is the improvement of their vocabulary, particularly academic words. One participant from Thailand, **James**, mentioned in his interview that the more he talked with his classmates in the classroom discussion, the more he learned new academic terms in English. He said, I think it's interesting [to actively participate in classroom discussion] because I can learn new vocabulary, I can learn new English terminology for my academic field. With a similar vein, **Rose** explained that being active in classroom discussion, at some points, contributed to her language proficiency, including vocabulary. She shared, I am trying to be active in all classroom activities, such as classroom discussion. By doing so, I can hone my language competence, especially vocabulary. The results of the interview showed that vocabulary can be improved by getting involved actively in discussions and other speaking activities inside the university.

Another benefit from speaking experiences in the university area is building up their confidence. Three participants revealed that they were at first reluctant to speak because of their limited proficiencies in English, but after communicating orally with the university staff and other international students, they started to feel less pressure in speaking. For example, Sun in her interview explained that speaking with international students made her free to talk because her friends talked clearly and understood her. She particularly shared I think speaking with my classmates like Indonesian and Spanish students is much easier for me because they speak clearly and I am confident to speak English with them. With a different story, **Angel** felt motivated and confident to speak to some university staff because they ignored her mistakes in communication. She stated, I find myself confident to speak to some staff because they ignore the mistakes I made, and most of them ignore my mistakes, I think. These transcriptions of the interviews indicated that frequent practice in verbal communication can help individuals gain their confidence to speak.

### **International Students' Speaking Experiences outside of University Setting**

Based on the result of data analysis, the participants shared that they faced both expected and unexpected challenges when communicating with local people in the market, restaurants and other public places outside of university. The most prominent challenge they faced was the same as the challenge in the university context, which was the accent. All participants shared that they had difficulty in understanding local people's accent. Some of them even ensured that speaking with local people outside of university was even much harder compared to speaking with local students and staff at the university. **Angel** explained in her interview that the accent of local people is difficult to understand and she oftentimes could not understand what they said. To emphasise this, she even compared the accents. She noted, when I went to London, [most of them spoke] with the BBC accent. It's very very standard, so it's easier for me to understand. But in Northern Ireland, especially public places, people have this thick accent that sometimes I really don't know what they're talking about. Likewise, **Rose** described her shopping experiences. She could not really understand what the shop assistant said when she asked about the price of some items. She shared, I once asked the shop assistant about the price

of something, and she responded with her unfamiliar accent and I could not understand it. These data revealed that the difficulty in understanding speaking accent may lead to the difficulty in comprehending the conversation.

The second challenge, based on the data analysis, is vocabulary and language expressions such as cultural jokes or idioms. For this, all participants also explained in their interviews that these aspects sometimes confuse them in doing interaction. *Sun*, for instance, highlighted that the use of cultural jokes uttered by the local people in public areas made her blank and get lost in the conversation. She mentioned, [When] I speak with Belfast people, the first idea that I [get] in my mind is where they are from (laugh). I just can't understand. Similarly, *Rose* said in her interview that the words that local people say in their jokes are culturally embedded and hard to understand. She specifically shared, I once did not understand talking to my local acquaintances. They tried to make some jokes, but I did not find it funny and could not understand the words. These exhibited that unfamiliar language expressions, especially culturally-embedded expressions, could cause confusion for speakers.

The next challenge that the participants experienced was the rate of speech. Three participants explicitly stated that they found it difficult to understand and continue conversation with local people due to their fast speaking speed. James, for example, admitted in his interview that local people's rate of speech, besides accent, was one of major challenges for him to speak with local people in public places. He uttered, I told you, language barrier. They talk very fast,,, and I didn't get it, I just don't know, and I feel like I'm dumb in front of them. Likewise, *Angel* exposed in her interview that local people's speaking speed caused her confusion to speak and respond to the talk. She specifically explained, Sometimes I get confused and don't understand [local people's talk] because of their speaking speed. These data clearly indicated that rate of speech may influence the understanding of conversation.

Another prevalent challenge in spoken communication, besides language issues, is the feeling of anxiety. This issue was mentioned by one of the participants in her interview. She, *Angel*, detailed that she occasionally felt anxious to speak and communicate with the local people outside of university, especially in the city centre. She worried that her words could confuse them. She specifically said in the interview, I am sometimes anxious, I used to [be] nervous and afraid of saying words or talking. This data transcription proves that being anxious may prohibit individuals from communicating in a society.

Although many participants explained their challenges in their interviews, they also mentioned some advantages they obtained from communication with native speakers in public places. The first benefit was improving their listening skill. Two participants argued that their listening improved after frequent practice and communication with local people in public places. *Angel*, for instance, shared that she forced herself to communicate because of her surrounding environment and this unconsciously helped her improve her listening skill. She expressed, People around me, they're speaking English, so how to say... unconsciously I'm practising my listening skill, yeah... sort of like that. When I order food, I have to speak English. With a similar vein, James, affirmed that he improved his understanding of the accent after communicating with and/or listening to local people's speech. He mentioned, I feel interested and then it

helps me to practise my accent, I mean listening with other [accents] as well. The data showed that the more frequent speaking practice, the more improved listening ability.

Aside from improving listening skill, another benefit of communicating with local people is their understanding of informal communication language, including collocation words and slang terms. This was addressed by two participants in their interviews. *Angel*, for instance, revealed that her communication with local people gave her more insights about the collocations used by local residents in their daily communication. She confessed, I think I learn ... like those collocations here from native [speakers], ... you haven't learned it from a formal textbook ... but you can hear it a lot from your experience of living in an English-speaking country. People here, they use that collocation, but you cannot see it [in] your textbook. Another participant, *Rose*, highlighted that she got more knowledgeable about Irish slang. She commented, By listening and communicating with local residents, I know more about local slang. These indicated that speaking with local people in public places helped international students enrich their language aspect in relation to the language use.

In short, the speaking experiences of international students in both inside and outside of the university environments contributed to their lived experiences studying and living in English environments. Through the speaking experiences, they faced some challenges that they had to deal with and also obtained more language insights and benefits which can be their valuable sources to develop their language and communication skills and competences.

## 4 Discussions

The main objective of this study is to deeply explore international students' speaking experiences while studying and living at one university in the UK. To be more specific, the experiences related the speaking experiences inside and outside of university environments and the discussion of the manuscript covered the speaking's challenges and the benefits obtained from speaking.

In terms of the speaking's challenges, we identified that accented speech is the most prevalent challenge. This challenge was experienced by international students both inside and outside of university environments. Accent is a distinctive way of language pronunciation which is mainly influenced by native dialect and/or language and is characterised by distinctive phonological variation, emphasis and language stress [20–22]. The challenge on understanding accented English is not surprising because this issue has also been highlighted by some scholars who investigated the experiences of non-English native international students [3, 23–25]. However, this finding strengthens the fact that the problem with accented speech remains as the possible reason which hinders international students from active communication both in the academic and non-academic context.

Another prevalent challenge, based on the data, for international students is the feeling of anxiety. This feeling is defined as a state of apprehension, worry, and fear [26, 27] when doing an activity. In relation to this issue, some studies have confirmed that anxiety is one frequent challenge for international students [4, 23, 28, 29]. Interestingly, although the participants experienced anxiety both inside and outside of university,

they only had the feeling when talking to local students, staff, and people, not to other international students. They argued that the absence of anxiety when communicating with other international students was because they all shared similar experiences. This indicates that international students, irrespective of nationality, can relate best to other international students owing to similar experiences they experienced studying away from their home countries [30]. On the other hand, the emergence of anxiety when making contact with local people both in academic and non-academic settings is possibly the result of differences in cultural values and school environments [31].

Besides accented speech and the feeling of anxiety, the difficulty in understanding cultural-context vocabularies is also pervasive. What it means by cultural-context vocabularies are the words or types of words used and spoken in a particular culture, such as slang, jokes and idioms. Some participants, in their interview, experienced some difficulties communicating with local people both inside and outside the university environments due to their inadequate knowledge and understanding of Northern Irish cultural-context vocabularies. As a result, they could not keep up with the conversation and missed some important information in the talk. This result suggests international students need to be aware of cultural words in order to maintain smooth communication with the local people. The importance of knowing and considering cultural words has been highlighted by [32]. She argued that speakers need to take into account some other factors, aside from language proficiency, in order to communicate successfully with others, including slang. Moreover, the finding corroborates Abrar's [23] study which revealed that the failure in understanding the local residents' jokes affected international students' comprehension and communication.

The results of the interviews also indicated that international students learned a lot from their challenging speaking experiences. They all contended that their speaking experiences and continued practices contributed to the improvement of their language proficiency, including in the aspect of speaking, vocabulary and listening. Several scholars and researchers repeatedly emphasised that practice is the best way for improving language proficiency and skills [33, 34]. This indicates that having practice can bring a positive impact for the improvement of language proficiency for language and/or global learners, including international students. In a nutshell, the more frequent international students practise their language, the more knowledgeable and fluent they are in a language. Furthermore, some researchers revealed that international students employed practice as one of their strategies to alleviate their language challenges and/or to enhance their competences in language [23, 35, 36].

One of the surprising findings from this study is that the participants built up their self-confidence from their speaking experiences despite the challenges they encountered in the process. According to Bandura (1986), self-confidence is an influential quality which motivates and regulates people's everyday life. This quality is important for individuals to possess because it relates to the judgement about their own capabilities for accomplishment of goal. Abundant of research indicated that difficulties, e.g., lack of language proficiency, negatively affects individuals' level of confidence in verbal communication especially non-native speakers of English (See [37–40]). In contrast with the result of some previous studies, the result of this inquiry indicated that participants have the ability to recover from challenging experiences, move forward, and grow known as resilience.



This quality is pivotal for students, including international students, to succeed in their study and social life's adjustment [41–43]. Furthermore, [41] and [42] separately argued that individuals' students' resilience contributes to their self-confidence. In other words, students who have a higher level of resilience tend to have higher self-confidence both academically and socially.

## 5 Conclusion

The main purpose of this inquiry is to explore international students' speaking experiences during their study and stay in the UK. The findings revealed that the participants had to face some expected and unexpected challenges both inside and outside of university environments. In terms of university environments, the participants, international students, experienced the difficulty with understanding the accents, handling speaking anxiety, vocabulary, and personality issues. Similarly, the participants had to deal with local people's accent and rate of speech, cultural-context vocabulary, and the feeling of anxiety. Besides the challenges they faced from communicating with others, they also learned and improved themselves in many aspects, including their language proficiency, more knowledge on both academic and non-academic words and terms, and self-confidence.

Despite the comprehensive discussion on international students' speaking experiences, this study undoubtedly has some limitations. First, this study is limited to only four international students as the participants. Future study may include a larger number of international students from diverse countries to get more comprehensive and in-depth discussion on the topic. Second, this study focused on exploring international students' speaking experiences qualitatively and its results cannot be generalised. Further research may employ a different method, e.g., survey, to generalise the findings and to see the difference in speaking experience of international students.

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