Research article

Inclusion in a multilingual higher education environment: a foreign student perspective

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Abstract

The issue of migrant integration has been a focus of debate by the Council of Europe for many decades. In this context, knowledge of the local language(s) is increasingly recognised as a condition for the acquisition of rights in the host country. It is also a key determinant of academic success and access to higher education. At the University of Luxembourg, several study programmes require simultaneous proficiency in one, two, three or even four languages, and while this policy may have its benefits, it can also represent a challenge, especially for foreign students. In this article, we use selected survey results to examine foreign students' perceptions of the multilingual higher education environment at the University of Luxembourg. The results show that multilingual educational policies can represent a risk for the inclusion of some foreign students. However, the findings also reveal that the process of inclusion really begins with teachers. Language teachers in particular are perceived by foreign students as resource

people from whom they primarily expect linguistic, emotional and motivational support. The survey also shows that foreign students pay particular attention to teaching methods – including those designed around digital technologies, which are often well received – as well as the professional skills and attitudes of teaching staff, and that this in turn enables them to decide whether they can develop a relationship of trust and collaboration with their teacher.

Keywords inclusion; language learning; multilingual higher education

Introduction

For more than 40 years, the Council of Europe has been addressing the issue of migrant integration in Europe. The acquisition of nationality or residence permits and the right to enter countries is increasingly dependent on attaining a certain level of language proficiency.

Foreign migrant populations tend to be particularly affected by these requirements, and the impact is especially significant on refugees,[1] who not only are unable to prepare for the process of immigration but also represent a growing share of the population. As per the statement from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in May 2023, approximately 110 million individuals worldwide have been displaced as a result of persecution, conflict and violence. This figure has more than doubled in a decade, from 51.2 million in 2013 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024). In 2016, the proportion of refugees with university-level education was around 15 per cent (Rich, 2016). Only 3 per cent of refugees access higher education. However, since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2019, demand for higher education has increased among refugees (De Wit, 2012). Over time, various universities have provided specifically tailored programmes for these populations, in an effort to 'help and accompany people … in their struggles to equip themselves with all the learning resources that will allow them to live in a dignified manner' (Úcar, 2016, p. 143). Examples of these programmes are the Passerelle programme offered by some French universities, the 2016 Horizon Académique programme at the University of Geneva and the Access2University language training programme at UC Louvain, Belgium. Access2University includes career guidance, training initiatives, digital literacy and social and cultural activities, with Belgian students providing mentoring for participants. In 2015, the University of Grenoble opened the Espace Colibri, an information centre for students in exile.[2] That same year, 23 higher education establishments in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (Belgium) were involved in mapping initiatives adopted to support migrants, refugees, and academics and researchers in danger (ARES); the map was subsequently updated in March 2022.

Training programmes have been developed specifically for refugee students because their needs differ from those of other foreign student populations such as international students on mobility programmes like Erasmus, who tend to receive more support. 'What differentiates refugee students from "classic" international students is that for them, self-fulfillment needs are very significant, even vital' (Rassart et al., 2020, p. 6[3]). On top of the requirement for linguistic skills, many refugee students have 'fundamental psychological needs' (Rassart et al., 2020, p. 8) such as feeling connected and supported by others, feeling as though they have autonomy as the originator or source of their actions and feeling capable of performing tasks of varying difficulty levels (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

These considerations regarding refugee populations, and more generally foreign migrant populations, led us to reflect on the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the language-related challenges facing foreign students in Luxembourg's higher education system? And how do they perceive these challenges?

RQ2: In what ways do foreign students feel most supported by their teachers, particularly in language learning?

RQ3: Does the digital culture of Luxembourg, apparent in and outside the language classroom, enhance foreign students' motivation to learn?

To this end, we begin this article by contextualising our research and explaining the rise in teaching strategies related to situations of disaster and emergency in light of recent international conflicts. We go on to discuss various projects that have been developed to meet the needs of refugee students. In the next section, given the importance of trust 'in addressing issues of educational disadvantage' and the fact that foreign students often see their language teachers as a point of reference (Baker et al., 2018, pp. 8–12), we discuss what students need to establish a supportive relationship with their language teachers, and what language teachers in turn need to be aware of to support students in overcoming the challenges that they have identified in the institution, especially in terms of language. We then recontextualise our results in the light of existing research and put forward a number of proposals for further research on the integration of foreign students, including refugee students, in universities.

State of the art

Studying in a new and unfamiliar environment is invariably a challenge, and for refugee students in particular, multiple factors may hinder their integration into the education system. However, some refugees succeed because they are able to draw on both 'locally and globally situated resources' (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017, p. 1011). In this process of social integration, mastery of the language is an essential prerequisite (Hambye and Romainville, 2014; Rassart et al., 2020).

Language training can therefore be assumed to be an essential ingredient for integration, not only for refugees but for foreign students in general. Educational policies need to be implemented to meet the needs of this heterogeneous population (Adami and Leclercq, 2012; Beacco et al., 2017; Le Ferrec and Véniard, 2021). However, as Beacco (2012) has pointed out, courses tailored to one specific group (for example, courses aimed only at refugee students) are not without risks and potential drawbacks.

Reflection on the geopolitical upheavals in recent years has led to the conceptualisation of teaching strategies for situations of disaster and emergency, as envisioned respectively by Gettliffe and Ardisson's (2022, p. 4) *didactique de la catastrophe* (disaster education) and Beacco's (2012) *didactique de l'urgence* (emergency teaching strategy). The notion of an emergency teaching strategy reflects the situation of the learners and the likelihood that they will suffer from some form of trauma as a result of their sudden journey (Crocq, 2004, p. 450). Psychological research on the learning conditions that should be provided for such students can offer guidelines that teachers can take into consideration when creating courses, such as using the 20-minute rule (a dynamic approach involving frequent changes of content and activity), introducing physical movement (including vocal exercises), focusing on positive emotions and, in particular, making use of digital technologies (involving a combination of sounds, images and text). These recommendations come from the presentation 'Psychological trauma and learning facilitation', aimed at helping teachers and researchers to adapt their language teaching to refugee students (Montanez, 2023).

The EU-funded projects EUCRITE (European Centre for Refugee Integration in Higher Education, 2017–19; see also Université Grenoble Alpes, 2020) and SERAFIN (2022–5; https://projetserafin.com) provide support and training to academic staff (both projects) and administrative staff (EUCRITE only) in their interactions with displaced students. The SERAFIN project collects resources and designs guidelines for language teachers of migrant learners. The recommendations are particularly geared towards French-language training, even though they apply to all languages.

In addition to these projects, a number of online language teaching initiatives have been launched in recent years to facilitate the integration of refugee students:

(a) https://lgidf.cnrs.fr/
(b) www.coe.int/fr/web/language-support-for-adult-refugees/webinar
(c) www.coe.int/fr/web/language-support-for-adult-refugees
(d) https://francaisfacile.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/les-voisins-du-12-bis/

The specific needs of refugee students, as outlined above, have implications for teaching and highlight the importance of catering for migrant populations in classroom settings. It is crucial to bear in mind, however, that the profiles of migrant populations can vary hugely (Baker et al., 2018; Wihtol de Wenden, 2016). This is an aspect that teaching staff must be made aware of in training courses on supporting foreign populations.

Methodology

Since the University of Luxembourg was founded in 2003, it has introduced the use of the country's three official languages – French, German and Luxembourgish – as well as English, in its internal rules and regulations (Lejot, 2015). This *de facto* multilingualism, which has played a key role throughout the country's history and remains dear to Luxembourg's communities, has shaped the university's educative mission (Garcia, 2014). However, it does not mean that each study programme is available in several languages and that students are free to choose the language in which they wish to study. In practice, the university's multilingualism means that attendance of a given study programme requires students to be proficient in one to four languages, depending on the requirements of their chosen programme. This peculiar context not only affects students' choice of studies and their day-to-day academic experience at a micro level; it may also reduce some students' chances of success at a macro level. In other words, the multilingualism of the University of Luxembourg presents both benefits and challenges for its students, who may experience disruption owing to the university's linguistic expectations (Weber and Horner, 2012).

Another specific feature of the education system in Luxembourg is the focus on digitalisation, at a time when technology-enhanced learning is increasingly recognised as a successful strategy that can underpin a more inclusive teaching approach in an increasingly globalised and diversified classroom (Arneton et al., 2022; 'L'équipement numérique', 2022; Reuter, 2022; Sandberg et al., 2022). The University of Luxembourg has embraced this dominant trend towards digital teaching, which, like in all educational spheres, raises challenging yet fundamental questions about the availability of digital tools, the digital literacy of students and teachers alike, as well as the effectiveness of technology use from a psychological perspective.

Given these observations and the subsequent involvement of the University of Luxembourg in the three-year European project SERAFIN (2022-1-BE01-KA220-HED-000085227), data collections targeting University of Luxembourg students were organised. In this article, we focus on some of the results of a survey conducted between October 2023 and January 2024.

Although the specific aim of the SERAFIN project is to provide language teacher training to support the inclusion of refugee students and students in exile in higher education, the survey – which contained open, semi-open and closed questions – was designed to make all foreign students' voices heard. This wider scope, which reflected the impossibility of identifying refugee students and students in exile by means of a database, also provided an opportunity to consider the nature of the foreign student population at the University of Luxembourg and to seek the students' views on specific linguistic challenges and other features of interest to academic teaching staff.

Solely requesting the participation of non-Luxembourgish students would have meant selecting them from the list of registered students and contacting them individually, so it was decided to make the survey available to the entire student population at the university. This raised the risk that some untargeted students might answer the survey, but to mitigate this we used Microsoft Forms, and more specifically conditional branching, to redirect students to the end of the survey or to more tailored questions once their background had been clarified. Depending on their background, participants were asked to answer between one and 90 questions, most of which were mandatory.

During the 2023–4 winter semester, when the survey was launched, the University of Luxembourg had 7,673 students. The survey was closed with 597 completed responses, 442 of which were non-duplicated and usable considering our target population. This response rate allowed us to go beyond the minimal sample size of 366 responses and thus to consider the survey results as valid and representative with a confidence level of 96.95 per cent (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970; Raosoft sample size calculator, 2004). The survey responses were then analysed using Microsoft Excel.

Results

In this section, we focus on four parts of the survey: the foreign student profiles; the language-related challenges reported by foreign students in Luxembourg's multilingual higher education system; the key features required for a supportive relationship between foreign students and language teachers; and the role of digital methods, inside and outside the classroom, in enhancing students' motivation to learn.

Foreign student profiles at the University of Luxembourg

In this article, the term 'foreign students' encompasses all students who have at least one non-Luxembourgish nationality and whose parents (one or both) are from outside Luxembourg. These antecedents suggest that the social and cultural reflexes and support on which students typically rely to integrate as 'students' and successfully pursue their studies may potentially differ from what is assumed by the local institution to be shared and accessible to all (Baker et al., 2018; Coulon, 2005; Kim and Diaz, 2013).

We further refined our analysis based on the students' reported registration status, place of residence, duration of residence in Luxembourg and intention of staying in the country on a long-term basis (see Figure 1). Of the 442 respondents, 41.18 per cent of the students are either first-generation or second-generation immigrant students.[4] The other dominant group is made up of foreign students who have lived in Luxembourg for less than a year but may wish to reside there on a long-term basis ('temporary migrants with or without immigration potential': 35.52 per cent). The three least represented groups are cross-border students who do not currently reside in Luxembourg ('commuters': 14.03 per cent), incoming students on an international mobility programme who 'intend to live in the host country temporarily' (Kim and Diaz, 2013, p. 4) (4.75 per cent) and (former or current) refugee/exile students (4.52 per cent).[5]

Figure 1. Foreign students categorised by student status, place of residence, duration of residence and intention of staying in the country on a long-term basis
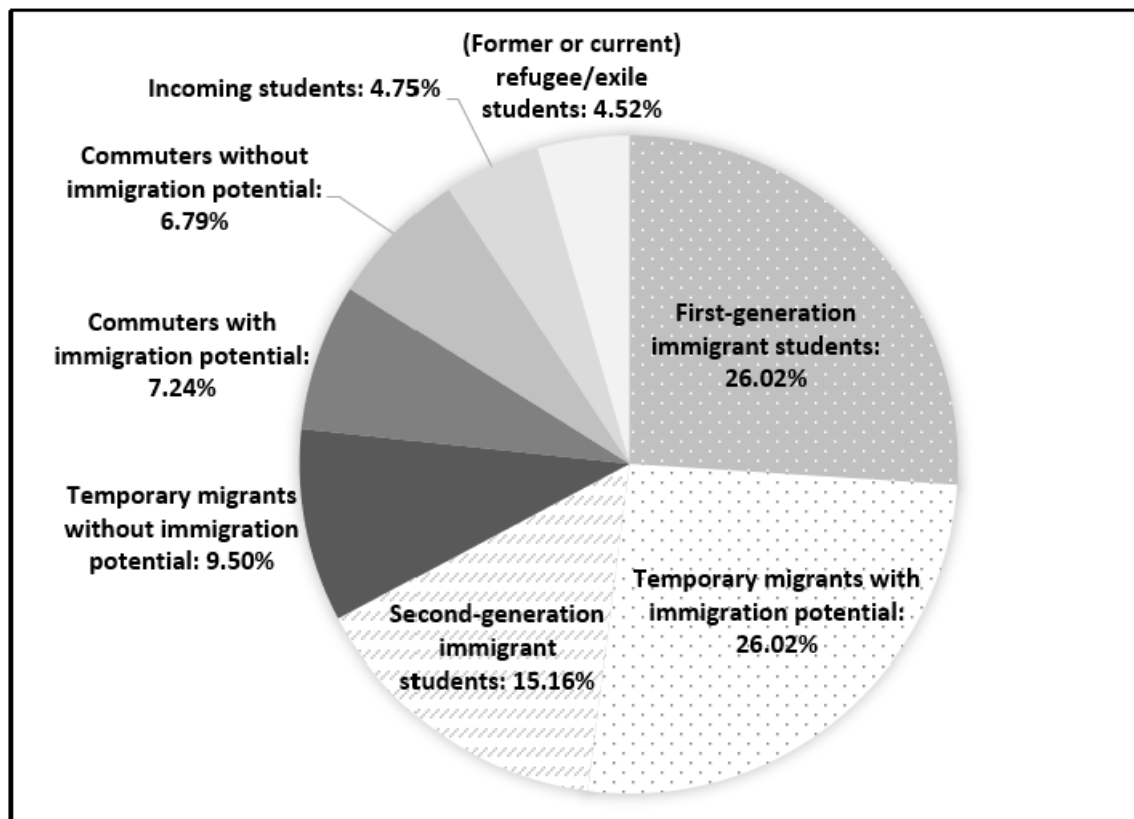
These students were socialised in a wide variety of contexts: 66 different countries of origin are reported (see Table 1).[6] However, for more than half of the students the country of origin is an EU member state (57.47 per cent), including Luxembourg and its neighbouring countries (Belgium, France and Germany) (39.37 per cent). Iran, India, China, Brazil and the United States (16.29 per cent) are dominant among the 48 non-EU countries.

Table 1. Country of origin

Countries	Number of respondents	%
Albania	5	1.13
Algeria	2	0.45
Angola	1	0.23
Azerbaijan	3	0.68
Bangladesh	1	0.23
Belarus	2	0.45
Belgium*	17	3.85
Brazil	9	2.04
Bulgaria*	1	0.23
Cameroon	5	1.13
Canada	1	0.23
Cape Verde	3	0.68
Chile	2	0.45
China	13	2.94
Colombia	4	≈0.89
Côte d'Ivoire	2	0.45
Croatia*	1	0.23
Cuba	3	0.68
Czech Republic*	2	0.45
Ethiopia	2	0.45
Finland*	3	0.68
France*	48	10.86
Germany*	31	7.01
Ghana	1	0.23
Greece*	4	≈0.89
Guinea	1	0.23
Hungary*	3	0.68
India	19	4.30
Indonesia	1	0.23
Iran	23	5.20
Iraq	1	0.23
Ireland*	2	0.45
Italy*	22	4.98
Japan	4	≈0.89
Kazakhstan	1	0.23
Korea (South)	1	0.23
Kuwait	1	0.23
Latvia*	1	0.23
Lebanon	2	0.45
Luxembourg*	78	17.65

Table 1. *Cont.*

Countries	Number of respondents	%
Mexico	2	0.45
Moldova	5	1.13
Montenegro	1	0.23
Morocco	3	0.68
Netherlands*	1	0.23
Nicaragua	1	0.23
Nigeria	6	1.36
Norway	1	0.23
Pakistan	6	1.36
Peru	4	≈0.89
Poland*	6	1.36
Portugal*	18	4.07
Romania*	5	1.13
Russia	6	1.36
Serbia	2	0.45
South Africa	2	0.45
Spain*	11	2.49
Switzerland	3	0.68
Syria	3	0.68
Tunisia	6	1.36
Turkey	7	1.58
Ukraine	5	1.13
UK	2	0.45
USA	8	1.81
Uruguay	1	0.23
Venezuela	1	0.23
Total	442	100.00

Notes: *EU countries

A large majority of the foreign students who responded to our survey identify as 'female' (63.8 per cent), of whom 34.16 per cent are aged between 18 and 23 (see Table 2). More generally, the age groups 18–23 and 24–30 account for more than two-thirds of the respondents (82.35 per cent).

Language-related challenges in a multilingual university

When designing the survey, the first language-related challenge we envisioned for foreign students at the University of Luxembourg was the application process, especially the choice of subject, as we assumed that some foreign students would be unable to apply for their preferred field of study because of the language requirements. Yet, among the 9.28 per cent of surveyed foreign students who said that they had to choose another discipline than the one they had originally planned to study, only 2.72 per cent did so because of language barriers.

Generally, languages reported as problematic were German, for just over half of students, and French, for just under a third (see Table 3). Luxembourgish was also mentioned, but less frequently.

Table 2. Gender by age

	Female student	%	Male student	%	Other	%	Total	%
Under 18	1	0.23	1	0.23	1	0.23	3	0.69
18–23	151	34.16	61	13.80	2	0.45	214	48.41
24–30	89	20.14	59	13.35	2	0.45	150	33.94
31–35	23	≈5.21	19	4.30	1	0.23	43	9.73
36–40	4	0.90	8	1.81	0	0.00	12	2.71
41–45	6	1.36	4	0.90	0	0.00	10	2.26
46–50	2	0.45	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	0.45
51–55	2	0.45	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	0.45
> 55	4	0.90	1	0.23	1	0.23	6	1.36
Number of respondents (n)/Total (%)	282	63.80	153	34.62	7	1.58	442	100.00

Table 3. Language barriers

Answers to the semi-open question: 'Which language(s) was/were problematic?'	Number of selections	%
English	0	0.00
German	9	52.94
French	5	29.41
Luxembourgish	3	17.65
Other (blank space)	0	0.00
Total	17	100.00
Number of students (n)	12	/

Table 4 shows that although a combination of up to two problematic languages (among German, French and Luxembourgish) was reported, most students only experienced issues with one language (n = 7), predominantly German in that case. In cases where the curriculum required a combination of two languages, however, French was slightly more likely to limit students' choices than German or Luxembourgish.

Apart from the language barriers that may hinder foreign students, another language-related challenge they may face is their (perceived) status as someone with another mother tongue: although these students might have a sufficient language level to follow academic courses, they are not native speakers of the target language(s). Consequently, it may be the case that their skills are not all sufficiently developed to support them in their learning and/or to enable them to pass exams at the university. In our sample, we observed that foreign students tend to identify writing as their weakest language skill. While there seems to be a consensus across languages that writing is the skill with which students struggle the most, the skill students feel most confident in varies depending on the language: users of French and Luxembourgish feel most at ease in listening comprehension, in contrast with reading comprehension in German and oral production in English.

In addition to the university's teaching languages, foreign students also report using other languages at the university. Depending on the targeted language skill (oral production, reading comprehension, listening comprehension or written production), 13 to 15 additional languages are mentioned as being used in the academic context (Arabic, Chinese, Czech, Dutch, Finnish, Greek, Italian,

Japanese, Latvian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish). In contrast to the other non-official languages, which tend to be used almost exclusively at an expert level (C1/C2), Portuguese, Italian and Spanish are the three languages mentioned the most that are spoken by users at all language levels.

Table 4. Reported language barriers

One language barrier reported	Number of selections	%	More than one language barrier reported	Number of selections	%
English	0	0.00	English	0	0.00
German	6	85.71	German	3	30.00
French	1	14.29	French	4	40.00
Luxembourgish	0	0.00	Luxembourgish	3	30.00
Other (blank space)	0	0.00	Other (blank space)	0	0.00
Total	7	100.00	Total	10	100.00
Number of students (n)	7	/	Number of students (n)	5	/

Regardless of the general trends mentioned above, not all profiles are equal when it comes to the university's linguistic prerequisites. Strikingly, refugee students and students in exile as well as commuters with immigration potential (that is, cross-border students who do not currently reside in Luxembourg but wish to do so on a long-term basis) are 2.5 times more likely to have to give up their original study path for linguistic reasons in comparison to the statistical mean for all foreign students.

Refugee students and students in exile, alongside first-generation immigrant students (that is, foreign students residing in Luxembourg for more than a year with the intention of staying in the country on a long-term basis) are also more inclined to encounter a problem with more than one official teaching language. While refugee students and students in exile follow the general trend and mostly mention the issue that French poses to them, German is slightly more frequently reported by first-generation immigrant students.

Refugee students and students in exile are also the group that most often self-assesses as having the most difficulties per language. For almost all of the university's official languages, between two and three language skills are rated more poorly: reading comprehension for English, listening comprehension and oral production in French, listening comprehension, oral and written production in German and, lastly, listening comprehension and written production in Luxembourgish. In comparison, first-generation immigrant students and commuters with immigration potential generally seem to experience fewer difficulties per language, although first-generation immigrant students self-assess more negatively in three of the four language skills in English (written production, listening and reading comprehension).

Considering the language-related challenges discussed earlier for refugee students, students in exile, commuters with immigration potential and first-generation immigrant students, it is therefore not surprising to observe that they tend to be less represented in multilingual and mostly French-taught curricula than the other foreign student profiles (average presence: 33.59 per cent, refugee students and students in exile: 15 per cent, commuters: 21.7 per cent, first-generation immigrants: 26 per cent). Examples of fields of study that are reported to regularly require at least three languages are education, humanities and behavioural and cognitive sciences, while French is found to be particularly frequently required in law studies. In our sample, these three student groups tend to predominantly and consistently register in STEM fields of study, such as computer science, finance, biology, medicine and nursing, engineering, mathematics or physics (average presence: 42.92 per cent, refugee students and students in exile: 70 per cent, commuters: 58.3 per cent, first-generation immigrants: 53.9 per cent).

Key features of a supportive teacher–student relationship

Foreign students who confirmed that they were currently registered on a language course (n = 102) were asked the following open question: What is important for you when looking for a language course (for example, content, environment, etc.)? Their answers were then categorised by theme, as displayed in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Important features of a language course

Topically arranged answers to the open question: 'What is important for you when looking for a language course (for example, content, environment, etc.)?'	Number of selections	%
Language teacher criteria	*118*	*54.38*
Teaching methods and choices	69	31.80
Expertise	25	11.52
Ability to motivate students	11	5.07
Ability to create a bond with students	8	3.69
Ability to create a supportive learning environment	5	2.30
Organisation criteria	*70*	*32.36*
Schedule	20	9.22
Equipped language classroom	16	7.37
Affordable courses	14	6.45
Location	12	5.53
Course type (face-to-face/hybrid/distance)	4	1.84
Small class size	4	1.84
Learner criteria	*29*	*13.36*
Need to bond with other students	7	3.23
Intrinsic motivation to learn	2	0.92
Learner agency	20	9.22
Total	*217*	*100.00*

The surveyed students consider language teachers to be a major determining factor when choosing a language course. Not only are their teaching methods valued, but their general expertise and ability to motivate students are also seen as important. More marginally, creating a learning environment that fosters relationships, whether among students themselves or between teachers and their students, is also highlighted.

Although the latter factor may not seem to be prioritised by students at first (see Table 5), developing a relationship, especially a relationship of trust, with their language teacher is still seen as crucial for a majority of the students (see Table 6).

Table 6. Trust in the teacher–student relationship

Answers to the closed question: 'Is trusting your language teacher important to you?'	Number of respondents	%
Yes	71	69.61
No	6	5.88
Not really	25	24.51
Total	102	100.00

More specifically, as shown in Table 7, in this relationship-building process, the surveyed students (n = 102) appear to pay more attention to the teaching itself than to the teacher's personality or expertise.

Table 7. Features of a trustworthy language teacher

Answers to the open question 'I feel I can trust my language teacher if my language teacher …', arranged by topic	Number of selections	%
Teaching-related criteria	*79*	*46.20*
Is attentive to the learners, their needs and development	11	6.43
Supports learners by giving them subject-related support	25	14.62
Supports learners by giving them emotional and motivational support	17	9.94
Is non-judgemental and respectful of learners, their questions and mistakes	12	7.02
Stays calm and professional	6	3.51
Uses the target language	4	2.34
Includes other non-targeted languages in his/her linguistic repertoire while teaching	2	1.17
Accepts the use of non-targeted languages	1	0.58
Prohibits the use of non-targeted languages	1	0.58
Language teacher's personality	*66*	*38.60*
Is reliable, sincere and honest	4	2.34
Is caring and kind	10	5.85
Has a sense of humour	3	1.75
Is open, approachable and communicative	19	11.11
Is motivated and dynamic	14	8.19
Is patient and tolerant	16	9.36
Language teacher's expertise	*26*	*15.20*
Demonstrates teaching skills or teacher training	19	11.11
Demonstrates linguistic competence or is a native speaker	5	2.92
Is an experienced teacher	2	1.17
Total	*171*	*100.00*

While students essentially determine teachers' trustworthiness through their actions in class, some actions underpin this more than others. The most frequently cited items are the subject-specific support provided by the teacher during or after class, the teacher's teaching skills, the teacher's openness and willingness to listen to the students, as well as the emotional and motivational support provided to students during class.

Subject-specific support may refer to providing additional teaching materials, particularly for students with learning difficulties, whereas emotional and motivational support may also involve including students in some way in all learning activities and valuing them for the efforts made, regardless of their poor language skills or potentially poor results.

Digital teaching through the prism of student motivation

Although nearly all the foreign student population (94.34 per cent) considers that teaching at the University of Luxembourg is digital, opinions diverge on the extent to which this digitalisation is applied in practice. As shown in Table 8, most of the respondents assert that teaching is undoubtedly digital, while the other dominant group believe that digital technologies could still be used more in class. This divergence of opinions can be attributed, at least to some extent, to the personal academic background of the students, as those who have already studied at another institution tend to have fewer doubts about the digital nature of academic education in Luxembourg.

Table 8. Digital nature of Luxembourgish academic education

Answers to the semi-open question 'Would you say that the university of Luxembourg provides teaching through digital technology?'	Number of respondents	%
Yes, definitely	210	47.51
Yes, but only to a limited extent	207	46.83
No	25	5.66
Total	442	100.00

However, these figures do raise the question of the perceived digital inclusiveness of the University of Luxembourg's teaching. We consequently wondered whether some foreign students, who may not be accustomed to the Luxembourgish education system, might feel excluded and demotivated by the current digital teaching practices.

As shown in Table 9, foreign students predominantly consider online portals and tools to be beneficial for learning. Another popular opinion, however, is that not all students are sufficiently digitally literate to harness the benefits of technology in education. It therefore appears that digitalisation is valued by most of the students, although some say that an additional effort is needed on their part in order to fit in.

Table 9. Effect of digital teaching practices

Answers to the semi-open question 'I feel that reliance on online portals and tools ...'	Number of respondents	%
Is very beneficial for learning	238	53.85
Is not a problem in itself for learning, but I have to adapt in many ways	153	34.62
Disrupts learning but to a certain extent only	35	7.92
Disrupts learning considerably	16	3.62
Total	442	100.00

On the topic of motivation related to digital teaching practices, we differentiated between activities held inside or outside the classroom, as we thought that this might affect students' perceptions. Our data suggests that this assumption might be accurate. When engaging in digital activities in the classroom, foreign students tend to consider digital teaching positively (49.53 per cent), as it is seen as a motivation booster and memory aid (see Table 10). The second largest group of students, however, have a more neutral opinion about the use of digital activities in class (41.55 per cent). They either take digitalisation as a given that should be included in all courses in this day and age, or they see it as a trivial medium change with no real implications and no lasting impression (that is, 'just another type of homework').

Table 10. Effect of digital in-class activities on student motivation

Answers to the semi-open question 'In class, when you engage in digital activities (for example, quizzes, activities with Kahoot, videos etc.), how do you feel?'	Number of selections	%
Digital activities motivate me to learn	224	26.67
Digital activities help me memorise things	192	22.86
Digital activities should be included in all courses nowadays	193	22.98
Digital activities are just another type of work	156	18.57
Digital activities are too technical for me	15	1.79
Digital activities discourage me from learning	23	2.74
I refuse to do digital activities in class	5	0.60
Other (blank space)	32	3.81
Total	840	100.00

This view that digitalisation is a new norm in the classroom is almost identical when it comes to activities designed for out-of-class use (see Table 11). However, in the out-of-class setting it is the neutral position that is the dominant view (43.13 per cent). In addition to this prevailing trend, digital activities in which foreign students engage outside the classroom are also perceived as a facilitating medium, helping students to focus on their studies.

Table 11. Effect of out-of-class digital activities on student motivation

Answers to the semi-open question 'Outside class, if you have digital activities to do (for example, quizzes, Kahoot activities, videos etc.), how do you feel?'	Number of selections	%
Having digital activities to do outside class is just another type of homework	229	43.13
Having digital activities to do outside class helps me work and focus on my studies	212	39.92
Digital activities make me feel burned out	32	6.03
I do not have time to do digital activities outside class	43	8.10
Other (blank space)	15	2.82
Total	531	100.00

Opinions on digital activities designed for use either in or outside the classroom tend to be mixed, even though they are, respectively, mostly positive and neutral, or mostly neutral and positive. Yet there is a notable increase in negative views if foreign students are involved in digital activities outside class hours. Students who are unsatisfied with digital activities in the classroom label them as too technical, a source of discouragement or an unwanted medium (5.13 per cent in total), whereas those who are not in favour of digital activities outside class hours see them as draining or disregard them altogether (14.13 per cent in total).

Discussion

In this section, we address the research questions set out above by analysing the results of the survey carried out among foreign students at the University of Luxembourg, while discussing their implications in the light of other existing research.

RQ1: What are the language-related challenges facing foreign students in Luxembourg's higher education system? And how do they perceive these challenges?

Higher education institutions are increasingly responding to recurrent waves of migration by developing local study programmes aimed at students arriving as a result of these population movements. One key focus of these programmes is to teach students the language of instruction that they will have to master sufficiently to meet the academic requirements of their discipline. At multilingual universities such as the University of Luxembourg, linguistic challenges can be seen on several levels, since study programmes are not generally monolingual. This observation led us to consider the potential language-related challenges faced by foreign students at the University of Luxembourg.

Although we expected to find that the language of instruction represents a major challenge and has a significant bearing on the choice of study programme for foreign students, the survey revealed that the impact is in fact minimal. However, some groups of students, like refugee students and students in exile, are affected more by local language policies than others. At the University of Luxembourg, we observed that linguistic requirements steered refugee students and students in exile more strongly than other students towards certain disciplines, especially STEM subjects, in which English is often used as a language of instruction or which only use one main teaching language (with the notable exception of monolingual study programmes for which the main language of instruction is French). While it may be argued that these fields are also chosen because they offer more prospects for recruitment in the Luxembourg job market, which is dominated by financial and banking institutions, the linguistic requirements of STEM programmes may also play a part in their popularity with these student groups.

This result raises the question of whether the over-representation of refugee/exiled students in such disciplines can be interpreted as a direct consequence of linguistic factors, and whether this highlights the fact that multilingual higher education institutions have a responsibility to encourage the inclusion of these students, especially in an educational system like that of Luxembourg. From primary school onwards, 'educational trajectories [in Luxembourg] are largely determined by [simultaneous proficiency in several] foreign languages' and linguistic problems 'must also be linked to the cultural context of the families, which can help the pupils concerned to overcome language difficulties' (Council of Europe, 2005, pp. 17–18) – or, on the contrary, which may hinder them. While Luxembourg's system is generally recognised as largely successful, it can be seen as compartmentalised and as reproducing exclusionary dynamics because of its multilingual approach (Council of Europe, 2005; Weber and Horner, 2012). In Luxembourg, we may ask whether a more inclusive educational environment in a context of increasing internationalisation of learners requires the opening of alternative courses in which the content is taught in English, at least initially (Cosnefroy, 2020; Grin, 2013), or, reflecting Luxembourg's multilingual tradition, in an official language of the learner's choice.

However, there is no common understanding of what the notion of internationalisation implies at an institutional level. This concept of internationalisation, which has evolved over the years (De Wit et al., 2015; Knight, 2004), has given rise to multiple requirements and objectives, especially at higher education institutions, resulting in contradictory perspectives and tensions (Cosnefroy, 2020).

In addition to the question of language(s) of instruction, the introduction of an 'access' diploma (*diplôme passerelle*), which would give newly arrived students the opportunity to access the university system, could be a strategic avenue worth exploring (Groupe d'information et de soutien des immigré-e-s, 2024). This approach has already been adopted by some institutions (see the Introduction) and is beginning to gain ground in Luxembourg with the option of registering as an 'auditor' (a non-degree-seeking student). The option of accessing the university system as an auditor merits further development, especially as auditors in Luxembourg are currently not eligible to take exams or register for an entire programme.

RQ2: In what ways do foreign students feel most supported by their teachers, particularly in language learning?

In view of the linguistic requirements at the University of Luxembourg, we wanted to explore the role that teachers might play, and especially the way(s) in which they can support foreign students in their learning.

The students' responses show that the teacher is a key factor in their decision to join a language course and that they see building a relationship of trust with their teacher as important. This trust-building

need relates to a wider socio-economic issue, given the impact that a relationship of trust can have in terms of educational equity: establishing a trusting relationship with the teacher allows students to compensate, at least in part, for a lack of local and immediately available knowledge and resources. Such knowledge and resources are important for survival and economic advancement, as well as for social mobility and adaptation to the educational and academic environment (Baker et al., 2018; Coulon, 2005; Kim and Diaz, 2013), and some student populations (particularly refugee students and students from low socio-economic status backgrounds) are less likely to be equipped with them than others. The role of the teacher in this respect can therefore be crucial.

Moreover, developing a relationship of trust with teachers, particularly language teachers – 'who are perceived as offering more formal support than friends, but less formal support than [the institution's "cold"] "officials"' (Baker et al., 2018, p. 7) – can enable students to create a partner community with the aim of navigating the institution and its challenges (Baker et al., 2018; McConnell, 2023) – including linguistic challenges as we saw in the previous section.

In this context, as students and teachers make efforts to exchange with each other (Freire and Ramos, 2009; McConnell, 2023), we feel that it is vital for institutions to recognise the role played by teachers (Baker et al., 2018). We would even go so far as to suggest that institutions could reduce teachers' workloads so that they are able to perform this task of supporting and guiding students on an official basis; currently it is an activity that is often carried out outside their formal remit and outside the classroom. If this option is pursued, teachers would have to be informed about the relevant procedures and available support and guidance services at the institution to ensure that they are able to perform this new task effectively.

During class time, we would suggest that rather than occasionally adapting to individual needs, teachers should systematically implement practices that inform and stimulate students, ensuring that their approach is suited to a wide range of profiles, including the most vulnerable. Because 'the "how to" in terms of explicit guidelines' (Lansing et al., 2023, n.p.), especially when it comes to trust and trust-building, is not often outlined, here are a few recommendations based on our results.

When it comes to developing a supportive teacher–student relationship, students place more emphasis on the teacher's practices in class than on their personality. An impactful teaching approach involves the teacher being clearly engaged and present for learners; this demonstrates not only teaching skills but also a desire to provide active linguistic, emotional and motivational support. Regarding the latter aspect, the students' responses indicate that they feel a trusted teacher should also motivate them to learn (Sandberg et al., 2022; Song and Kim, 2017; Wang and Liu, 2024), showing that they place expectations on teachers that go beyond considerations related to content and teaching methods. Such teacher-related factors serve to facilitate the learning experience, helping students to internalise extrinsic motivation and turn it into a learning behaviour geared towards language learning.

RQ3: Does the digital culture of Luxembourg, apparent in and outside the language classroom, enhance foreign students' motivation to learn?

When reflecting on what motivates learners, we wondered whether some foreign students who are not particularly familiar with the digital culture at the University of Luxembourg may perceive the digitalisation of teaching negatively, which might jeopardise their relationship with their language teachers as well as their learning. Our analysis disproves this theory as we can see that foreign students are in favour of digital activities, whether because they see them as beneficial or as the 'new normal' in the digital era.

However, the results are not entirely clear-cut; there are subtleties that need to be taken into account. Although not an opinion held by the majority of students, digital activities outside the classroom are more likely to be perceived negatively by learners, which may call into question the relevance and effectiveness of organising non-classroom-based digital activities. But rather than seeing this as indicative of the need for a wholesale rejection of asynchronous digital learning, which has proven effective in other contexts (see, for example, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018), we see it as something that teachers need to be aware of; namely, the fact that students' engagement with digital activities seems to depend, even if only marginally, on whether such activities are designed for use in or outside the classroom.

We therefore conclude that if teachers begin by experimenting with digital activities solely in the classroom, this is likely to boost students' favourable perceptions, and it will also give teachers the opportunity to ensure that all students have the skills and tools they need to make the most of digital teaching and/or learning.

Contrary to the now debunked myth of the digital native (Kirschner and Debruyckere, 2017), new generations tend to be digital consumers, rather than users or creators. This trend cannot be overlooked, whether digital technology is used to support learning inside or outside the classroom.

Research limitations

The majority of questions in our survey were closed or semi-open. While these formats are easy to analyse and unambiguous, offering respondents a list of possible answers limits the potential for expression and the addition of nuance. To counterbalance this bias, we added optional comments fields at the end of each section to give the students the opportunity to express their thoughts more freely about the questions they had just answered. We also included compulsory open questions that asked students to clarify their previous response. For example, the closed question 'Is trusting your language teacher important to you?' was followed by the open question 'I feel I can trust my language teacher if my language teacher is/does …'.

Moreover, while the use of conditional branching meant that only the most relevant respondents answered each question, the drawback was that some questions were only answered by a small number of students, potentially reducing their validity. Subsequent research should therefore expand the sample size and aim to gather additional information about the perceptions of foreign students in multilingual academic contexts.

Finally, the decision to process all the answers together, making no distinction between foreign student profiles, reflects the real-life conditions in the field: lecturers at the University of Luxembourg, including language teachers, do not generally have access to information about students' backgrounds, especially in the case of refugee, exile and immigrant students (Baker et al., 2018, p. 3, refer to this factor as the result of 'an uncoordinated approach and a sector-level inability to capture the [students'] status'). However, generalising the results without distinguishing between profiles and their specific needs may raise questions. Future research might re-examine these topics in the light of the students' profiles.

Conclusion

In the space of just a decade, the number of displaced people worldwide has doubled. While these people are likely to have a varied linguistic repertoire, this does not necessarily mean that their linguistic capabilities are relevant or sufficiently advanced for the local context in which they will find themselves living. Yet mastering the language of the community is an essential step towards integration (Punar Özçelik et al., 2022). Linguistic proficiency is necessary to access many spheres of society, such as employment and education, especially higher education.

In Luxembourg, both these spheres are characterised by multilingualism, with three official languages (French, German and Luxembourgish) used for different aspects of life rather than in different geographical regions (Garcia, 2014). We therefore aimed to assess foreign students' perceptions of Luxembourg's complex socio-cultural context via a survey carried out in connection with the SERAFIN Erasmus+ project. We also explored what language teachers could do to support these students in coping with 'the problems deriving from such complexity' (McConnell, 2023; Úcar, 2016, p. 132). Our results show that academic multilingual requirements place some disadvantaged categories of foreign students in a more precarious position, as they might be more likely to encounter a problem with one of the official teaching languages, experience more difficulties per language and be guided by local linguistic policies in their academic choices and therefore their life path(s).

To encourage the resilience of these foreign students, especially the most vulnerable among them, teachers – with whom students must build a relationship of trust – need to adopt methods that reflect a professional attitude and an engaging approach. Foreign students value teachers who are flexible, open, non-judgemental, dynamic, attentive and supportive. The variety of teaching methods employed, including digital technologies, also influences students' perceptions and motivation to learn. It is therefore clear that, over and above broad institutional considerations, the integration of foreign students is affected by aspects at a more human level, including teachers and especially teaching approaches.

Since 'social pedagogy is, first and foremost, education', our last thought in this article will be 'an educational one' (Úcar, 2016, p. 131) that focuses on this human dimension: pre-service and in-service teacher training can be a useful forum to provide teachers with a clear awareness of their professional practices and the impact of these practices on students' learning behaviours (Lansing et al., 2023; Sandberg et al., 2022; Wang and Liu, 2024). This discussion is particularly important because it shows that teachers have a role to play in supporting students, especially vulnerable groups such as refugee students and students in exile, as they seek to overcome cognitive anxiety resulting from a series of personal and potentially trauma-related circumstances, and in encouraging them to remain in a learning dynamic and to pursue their university education.

Notes

[1] 'The 1951 Geneva Convention (Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951 Relating to the Status of Refugees) defines who, in what circumstances, is to be treated as a refugee and how they are to be cared for. All EU Member States are signatories to the Convention, and at EU level their obligations are reflected in the Qualification Directive. Article 1A of the Convention provides that the term "refugee" shall apply to any person who, owing to well-founded fear of persecution, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the country of his nationality or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it.' (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2010).

[2] Individuals in exile are defined as those 'who have left their country, voluntarily or under any kind of coercion, and are forced to live outside their homeland' (translated from the French: 'Personne qui a quitté son pays, volontairement ou sous la contrainte [de quelque nature qu'elle soit]. Personne contrainte à vivre hors de sa patrie': SERAFIN Project, glossary). Unlike refugees, individuals in exile are not referred to in the 1951 Geneva Convention and thus have no specific legal status, although both groups tend to have faced similar immigration experiences. In this article, refugees and individuals in exile will be considered jointly.

[3] Translated from the French: 'ce qui différencie les étudiants-réfugiés des étudiants internationaux "classiques", c'est que chez eux les besoins liés à l'accomplissement de soi sont très importants, voire vitaux.'

[4] First-generation immigrant students are 'students who have made the choice to leave their home country, without being forced to do so, to live in the host country, and who intend to live in the host country permanently' (Kim and Diaz, 2013, p. 4), while second-generation immigrant students are students 'who were born in the [host country] with at least one immigrant parent' (Kim and Diaz, 2013, p. 4).

[5] Refugee students are students who were forced to leave their home country and have been granted refugee status by the Luxembourg ministry responsible for asylum following their application for international protection (Law of 18 December 2015). Obtaining refugee status is a prerequisite for enrolment at the University of Luxembourg.

[6] Note that by country of origin, we mean the country in which respondents have spent most of their lives, regardless of their country of birth or nationality.

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Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

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