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To cite this article: Vera Spangler & Rachel Brooks (19 Aug 2026): Language as agency in international student mobility, Mobilities, DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2026.2713559](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2026.2713559)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2026.2713559>



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Published online: 19 Aug 2026.



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Language as agency in international student mobility

Vera Spangler^{a*}  and Rachel Brooks^b 

^aDepartment of Science Education, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark; ^bDepartment of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

Language in international student mobility is often framed as a matter of proficiency, reducing complex experiences to deficits and overlooking the structural forces shaping higher education. This paper reframes the discussion by focusing on international students' agency as it is exercised through language, examining how linguistic practices mediate their engagement with educational and transnational mobility. Drawing on qualitative data from an ethnographic study across the UK, Denmark, and Germany, we explore how international students navigate language in everyday social interactions, and mobility opportunities in context. We employ two conceptual lenses – self-formation, highlighting students' reflexive agency and hybrid identity negotiation, and the education-migration nexus, situating students' choices within structural, policy, and economic dynamics. Our analysis shows that language functions as both a medium and a resource through which international students enact agency, negotiate belonging, and strategically position themselves across academic, social, and migratory domains. The study challenges reductive deficit framings and emphasises the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints in shaping international student mobility.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 February 2026
Revised Accepted 21 July 2026

KEYWORDS

International student mobility; higher education; language; self-formation; education-migration nexus; agency

Introduction

In many global higher education (HE) settings, English has become the dominant language of instruction, research, and academic exchange, particularly within international student mobility (ISM). As students move across educational, linguistic, and national contexts, this dominance shapes not only participation in HE but also how international students' experiences and mobilities are researched and understood. A significant strand of the literature on international students focuses on English language issues, often reducing experience to questions of proficiency and casting language difficulties as the central challenge. Many international students come from contexts where English is not used in everyday communication (Sawir et al. 2008), leading to an emphasis on language barriers in academic and social life (Zhang and Mi 2010). Writing in a second language (Andrade 2006) and difficulties with listening and oral communication (Anderson 2014) are frequently framed as individual problems to be overcome, reflecting a deficit orientation. This focus obscures the structural and historical conditions underpinning English dominance in HE, implicitly locating the 'problem' in students rather than in the institutional and epistemic

CONTACT Vera Spangler  vera.spangler@ind.ku.dk  Department of Science Education, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, 2200, Denmark

^{*}Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, UK.

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structures that reproduce such inequalities across transnational educational spaces. Recognising these constraints opens space to consider international students as active agents navigating and negotiating transnational experiences (Li and Gong 2022; Mittelmeier, Lomer, and Unkule 2024). This aligns with recent calls to move beyond language difficulties and the geographies of inequality they produce, towards agency and identity negotiation. Tran and Hoang (2024) argue that agency is shaped by socioeconomic, cultural, educational, and familial backgrounds rather than being an abstract trait, and that mobility should be understood not simply as movement between locations, but as a process of becoming (see also Spangler 2025; Tran 2016; Tran and Vu 2018), in which identities are continuously (re)shaped through aspirations and experiences across educational, cultural, geographical and life boundaries. This highlights the dynamic realities of international students beyond reductive portrayals as uniform or detached mobile subjects.

Building on this, a growing body of work emphasises the complex and multifaceted nature of international students' identities and agency (e.g. Nguyet Nguyen and Robertson 2022; Schneider 2025; Tran and Vu 2018). Mobility can be a profoundly transformative process, in which experiences abroad are not simply external events that happen to students, but are actively interpreted, negotiated, and given meaning through everyday social, linguistic, and institutional encounters. Experience is therefore not passive but constituted through practice and participation (Deuchar 2022), and is relational and processual, shaped through interactions with people, spaces, structures, and shifting forms of belonging. In this sense, experiences abroad become opportunities for self-exploration, reflection, and personal growth. International students carry multiple identities that are continuously negotiated across home and host communities (Spangler 2025), and often develop strategies to navigate transient environments and enhance learning (e.g. Singh 2021). Identity in the host context can thus be temporary and strategic, a mode of positioning oriented towards specific goals. Within this, language socialisation is both central and constitutive of identity formation. By language socialisation, we refer to the process through which individuals learn, negotiate, and are positioned within linguistic practices, norms, and expectations through everyday interaction. Through language as a primary medium, students are both socialised into and actively engage with the practices and routines of their new sociocultural environment (Soltani and Tran 2023). While widely recognised as important, the relationship between language socialisation and identity formation remains underexplored within ISM, despite extensive work in applied linguistics (e.g. Norton 1995; Ugwuanyi and McKenzie 2026). Further attention is needed to how students navigate everyday language practices across academic and social contexts, including how linguistic resources are used in context-dependent, relational, and affective ways that are at times strategic but also emergent and fluid.

To better understand these processes, we draw on qualitative data from an ethnographic field study conducted across the UK, Denmark, and Germany. The analysis shows how international students' linguistic practices emerge across shifting social, academic, and mobility contexts, shaping and reshaping their identities and trajectories in relational ways. Agency and identity are linked insofar as linguistic practices reflect both students' capacity to act and the ways they are positioned within academic and social spaces. Language is therefore treated as a bridging mechanism between identity formation and mobility trajectories; it shapes not only belonging and self-understanding but also spatial decisions, including study destinations, opportunities, and longer-term settlement possibilities. In this way, the self-formation lens and the education-migration nexus are not separate arguments but complementary entry points into how students negotiate language, identity, and mobility across different spaces.

Self-formation

Building on this reorientation towards agency and identity, we draw on conceptual perspectives widely used in ISM research but less often applied to language, which offer considerable

analytical traction here. The first is self-formation, developed by Marginson (2014, 2024) and applied to both domestic and internationally mobile students. Self-formation in HE refers to the process through which students become self-determining subjects, shaped by two key processes: immersion in knowledge and social-relational activity outside the classroom. It also presupposes autonomy, reflexive agency, and the will to self-form through learning (Marginson 2024). However, self-formation is unevenly distributed, depending on access to linguistic, cultural, and institutional resources structured by intersecting inequalities of class, race, gender and prior educational privilege (e.g. Holloway, O'Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Iorio and Pereira 2018; Spangler, 2026; Waters 2023). Recent scholarship within mobility studies has increasingly conceptualised ISM not simply as geographical relocation, but as an ongoing process of becoming through which students negotiate identity, belonging, and subjectivity across multiple spaces and social worlds (Martin 2023; Spangler 2025; Tran 2016; Tran and Vu 2018). From this perspective, mobility is not only movement between nation-states or institutions, but a relational and spatial process shaped by shifting expectations, forms of recognition, and possibilities for selfhood. As students move across academic, social, linguistic, and institutional settings, they actively negotiate who they are, how they are positioned, and who they might become.

The self-formation of international students happens, Marginson (2014) contends, within the 'conditions of disequilibrium' produced by mobility, as they form a hybrid identity 'somewhere between home country identity (which continues to evolve in the country of education), host country identity, and a larger set of cosmopolitan options' (p.6). This aligns closely with Tran's (2016) understanding of mobility as 'becoming'. She contends that international education can support mobile students in becoming who they aspire to be across personal, professional, social, and educational dimensions. Importantly, this process is non-linear, involving ongoing negotiation across spatial, social, and temporal contexts, often marked by ambivalence, experimentation, and uneven belonging (Martin 2023). Tran (2016) thus frames international students as 'self-forming agents who have the potential capability to pursue the course of life that they regard as being worth living and meaningful to them' (p.1286). Within these mobility processes, language plays a central role. Rather than functioning merely as a tool for communication, language mediates how mobility is experienced and enacted in everyday life. Unequal linguistic repertoires shape how students move through different spaces, access opportunities, establish relationships, and experience recognition or exclusion. Linguistic practices therefore mediate mobility and becoming, influencing how students navigate transitions across classrooms, campuses, workplaces, and wider social environments. These processes of self-formation are thus linguistically mediated and socially stratified, as unequal repertoires and expectations of competence shape belonging, difference and legitimacy (e.g. Li and Gong 2022; Spangler and Adriansen 2021; Yeo et al. 2019).

Although, as noted above, few studies have explicitly connected self-formation to language in ISM, there are clear indications that this perspective has considerable resonance. Scholars have highlighted the multilingual nature of even ostensibly monolingual universities (e.g. Söderlundh 2012), pointing not only to linguistic diversity but also to the uneven valuation of linguistic resources that conditions participation in academic life (e.g. Ennser-Kananen, Halonen, and Saarinen 2021; Hayes 2019; Zheng and Qiu 2024). Such work also shows how international students navigate multiple linguistic and social worlds simultaneously, moving across spaces structured by differing expectations of communication, legitimacy, and belonging. Empirical studies reinforce this point, showing how multilingual practices are integral to students' identity work. Mazanderani et al. (2022), for instance, explore the 'continuous acts of translation' undertaken by international doctoral students in the UK, while Arafat and Woodin (2022) illustrate how multilingualism among peers supports the development of student voice. Writing with respect to China, Dai and Hardy (2024) demonstrate how language is embroiled in the 'in between' cosmopolitan habitus of international students. Together, these studies suggest that

linguistic practices are closely tied to the lived experience of mobility, as students continually negotiate participation, recognition, and selfhood across contexts.

Processes of self-formation are also hinted at in this discussion of language as a means of 'world making' from Bhatt, Badwan, and Madiba (2022):

We share the view that the university has potential for 'world-making' ... and that language remains key not only to the world-making processes to which students, staff and management contribute, but also to the shaping of university spaces and to connecting or disconnecting people from one another, and from histories, roots, legacies and marginalised 'funds of knowledge'. (p.429)

This spatial dimension matters because multilingualism is unevenly distributed across the university, produced through campus organisation, institutional routines, and everyday social practices. Classroom layouts, study group formations, and social spaces can create implicit linguistic boundaries that shape participation and belonging (Adriansen et al. 2023; Spangler and Adriansen 2021). This aligns with migration scholarship on how spatial arrangements shape language use and produce inclusion and exclusion. These uneven linguistic geographies are also socially stratified, shaping not only how students can act (agency) but also whose self-formation is rendered more or less possible (Spangler, 2026).

Education-migration nexus

While self-formation emphasises identity and agency, the education-migration nexus shows how these processes are constrained and structured by mobility infrastructures, policy and labour market geographies, situating identity work within uneven spatial and temporal opportunity structures. The education-migration nexus also draws attention to how mobility is experienced, negotiated, and unevenly shaped across educational, linguistic, and social contexts. The term 'education-migration nexus' has been deployed by many scholars who have written about the ways in which processes to do with education and migration are closely intertwined. In her book, which focuses specifically on this nexus, Robertson (2013) argues that market-driven forces have intertwined the mobilities of globalised flows of students and workers, with significant social consequences. International student mobility may be driven partially or even predominantly, in some national contexts, by economic motives (e.g. Alberts and Hazen 2005), sometimes with the explicit encouragement of host country governments. In Australia in the first decade of the 21st century, for example, would-be immigrants received extra points (in the Australian points-based migration system) for holding an Australian educational qualification, and special visa categories were introduced to facilitate movement from international student to immigrant worker (Robertson 2011). Scholars have also explored the close links between educational mobility and the desire to acquire citizenship of another country (which may or may not be related to the labour market issues discussed above). Dating back several decades, research has documented how ISM has sometimes been pursued as a means of securing citizenship elsewhere – for example, in relation to flows of students from Hong Kong to the US (Ong 1999; Waters 2006), and from India to Australia (Baas 2006; Robertson 2011). While some countries have been much more open to students staying on after their studies than others (Brooks and Waters 2011), ISM can, in some situations, provide a helpful 'trial run' for living abroad (Favell 2008; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003).

Although much of this literature has focused on structural and policy dimensions, students themselves are not passive actors within the education-migration nexus. They actively weigh educational choices, migration routes, and settlement possibilities in relation to their aspirations and circumstances (Beech 2019; Holton and Riley 2013). Everyday practices through which students seek recognition and belonging may also be understood as part of this nexus, including attempts to be read as 'local' rather than as mobile subjects (Prazeres 2018). These practices are also structured through unequal linguistic and symbolic resources, as language operates as

a form of capital through which legitimacy, employability, and belonging are differentially distributed. From this perspective, the education-migration nexus is itself linguistically and socially stratified, in that both educational trajectories and migration pathways are shaped through unequal access to linguistic competence, institutional recognition, and socio-economic resources (Bilecen 2024; Waters 2012). Despite this, language remains underexplored within this nexus. The few exceptions tend to highlight policy disconnects between HE and labour market integration. Reflecting on the situation in Finland, for example, Saarinen (2020) observes that 'students are politically encouraged [by the government] to stay, but the language training of the master's programme does not provide enough the kind of language in the national language that the students' versatile needs would require' (p.106). Examples such as this suggest that students' agency emerges through ongoing negotiations of the linguistic demands that shape their chances of staying, working, or securing long-term settlement. We therefore argue that bringing the education-migration nexus into dialogue with questions of language offers a valuable analytical perspective. It highlights how language is not only a medium of learning but also a decisive factor in whether, and how, international students can transition from education to work, settlement, and longer-term mobility trajectories. This provides the framing for the second of our two empirical sections below.

Language and internationalisation: shifting policies in the UK, Denmark, and Germany

The UK, Denmark, and Germany were chosen for this study as they represent distinct HE contexts. While all three countries are prominent destinations for international students, they differ in factors such as population size, language, historical developments, and regulatory frameworks (e.g. visa and residency policies). Political decisions and policy changes have shaped their approaches to internationalisation, influencing their educational landscapes and priorities.

The UK has long been a top destination for international students due to its English-medium instruction (EMI), prestigious universities, and historical ties (Waters and Brooks 2021). However, Brexit and the withdrawal from the Erasmus programme have disrupted its role in European HE. Erasmus fostered European integration and belonging, and the UK's exit, alongside stricter post-study work and residency rules, has created uncertainty for international students. Additional restrictions, such as limits on family accompaniment for master's students, further influence study decisions. Home Office figures show a 13% decline in sponsored study visa applications in the year ending January 2025, while applications from student dependants fell by 84% following rule changes limiting eligibility to postgraduate researchers and government-funded scholars (Home Office 2025). These trends reflect shifting perceptions of the UK as a study destination and growing uncertainty around long-term settlement prospects.

Denmark, with its small population and limited global use of Danish, has long used EMI to attract international students, with a significant rise in English-taught programmes since the 1990s (Mortensen 2014). However, tensions over the dominance of English led the government in 2018 to instruct six universities to reduce international recruitment. This followed a 2013 policy capping student grants for EU students and was part of broader efforts to limit international enrolments, described as a form of 'de-internationalisation' (Wright 2022). Like the UK, Denmark has shifted towards a more nationalistic approach to internationalisation, with policies aimed at reducing student inflows (Tange and Jæger 2021). More recently, policy has shifted again towards rebalancing internationalisation with domestic labour market needs, reflecting renewed interest in attracting international talent (see Lundin 2025; Wright 2025).

Germany's HE system has undergone sustained internationalisation, promoting academic mobility and multilingualism to strengthen global competitiveness (European Commission 2008). To align with global trends, Germany has integrated EMI into its strategy (Hunter and Lanvers

2021). This expansion has been driven largely by top-down federal policy, shaped by the Bologna Process and national talent strategies. Universities have expanded EMI provision and recruitment of international students and staff, contributing to a significant rise in international enrolments (Zhang, Lütge, and Zou 2024). English-medium provision has become central to internationalisation, but not at the expense of German. Indeed, many international students increasingly engage with German, recognising its importance in local labour markets (Deutscher Akademischer Auslandsdienst 2020).

Across the UK, Denmark, and Germany, internationalisation strategies reveal distinct national responses to globalisation in HE. Language policies such as EMI play a central role in attracting international students, yet they remain subject to rapid policy shifts shaped by national priorities. As a result, international students navigate an unstable policy environment that directly affects their educational trajectories and post-study opportunities. Political decisions on recruitment, migration, and residency therefore materially shape students' prospects of remaining after graduation.

Research project

This study is based on a 11-month cross-national ethnography conducted between September 2023 and July 2024 across the UK, Denmark, and Germany. The research followed two cohorts of master's students in each country, totalling approximately 160 students, including 39 international students who served as key informants¹. The broader project examined questions of knowledge legitimacy and the role of ISM in the reproduction of global hierarchies within HE. Although language was not the primary focus, it emerged as a recurring and analytically significant dimension of students' everyday academic experiences across all three sites.

The key informants represented 28 different nationalities, and all programmes used English as the language of instruction (see Table 1). English-taught programmes were selected because they are offered across all three countries and more reliably include international students, enabling comparison of language practices across contexts. Interviews were conducted in English or German, according to participants' preferences. Participant observation took place both on and off campus, focusing classroom dynamics and student-lecturer interactions, while also occasionally extending to social gatherings beyond formal university settings. This paper draws on the fieldnotes from these observations and two rounds of interviews: timeline interviews, which mapped international students' educational and geographical trajectories, and walking interviews, which explored their daily experiences and movements (see also Spangler 2026).

All names were anonymised, and ethical approval was granted by the University of Surrey Ethics Committee (reference number FASS 22–23 086 EGA). Data were coded in NVivo and analysed thematically. The first author conducted the fieldwork and interviews, while analysis was undertaken collaboratively through regular team discussions based on translated extracts and summaries.

Participants had varied migration and educational trajectories. While most had moved specifically for HE, others had previously lived in the country, either after completing earlier degrees

Table 1. Overview of programmes.

Country	Cohort	Total no. of students	No. of international students	No. of key informants	Subject area
UK	M1	24	12	6	Theatre and performing arts
	M2	24	12	5	Economics
Denmark	M3	22	6	3	Outdoor education and environmental studies
	M4	47	23	10	Food systems and society
Germany	M5	20	19	8	Neuroscience and modelling
	M6	23	18	7	Environmental systems and planning

or having arrived for other reasons before entering HE. Rather than applying a predefined definition of international student, recruitment was based on students' self-identification (see also Eulath Vidal and Kamp 2025). Students were therefore included if they considered themselves international students, regardless of length of stay, prior experience in the country, or reasons for relocation. At the start of fieldwork, the ethnographer introduced the project to each cohort, and recruitment occurred through students approaching the researcher after these presentations or during informal encounters on campus.

Language, self-formation, and the education-migration-nexus

The concept of self-formation frames the first empirical section, which examines how international students navigate new linguistic and cultural environments. Focusing on processes of becoming, hybrid identity formation, and life in disequilibrium, it explores how agency and identities are shaped through multiple linguistic and cultural influences. The second section draws on the education-migration nexus to examine how education, mobility, and language acquisition shape students' settlement aspirations and future opportunities. Across both sections, we draw on illustrative cases from the UK, Denmark, and Germany to highlight how language shapes students' experiences, from identity negotiation and academic engagement to broader socio-structural conditions. Cases were selected for their analytical relevance to language, richness of data, and diversity of nationalities and study trajectories.

Self-formation and agency: the role of language in shaping hybrid identities

Sofia grew up in Spain and has a Spanish father and a German mother. She studied in Scotland for her undergraduate degree and is now pursuing a master's in Germany. Although she had visited Germany before, this is her first extended stay, motivated by a desire to connect with her German roots. Initially, her limited proficiency in German made her appear shy and reserved, traits she does not recognise in herself. After several months, her language skills improved, enabling her to interact more easily with others:

I think differently in different languages, and I think I am a different person. I think in German, like very lately, I started being able to react to things a little bit faster and just like interact with people. I think I've been coming across as like very shy and very quiet because I simply can't think and speak that fast in German. I'll understand everything, but I just feel like I can't say what I want to say in every moment, or I'll think of making a joke and I just can't do that. So, it does feel like a bit of a barrier, and it does kind of make me a bit of a different person than who I think I am.

Her reflection shows how language shapes both self-perception and how others perceive her. The shyness she describes stems not from personality but from linguistic limits on self-expression, producing a sense of being 'a bit of a different person'. Aware of this gap, Sofia actively reflects on its effects on her evolving identity. In doing so, she engages in a process of identity negotiation, working towards a self-presentation that feels more authentic. As Tran (2016) argues, mobility is not just about physical movement but an ongoing process of becoming. From a mobilities perspective, this involves the continual negotiation of belonging, subjectivity, and participation across shifting social and linguistic environments (Cui and Song 2026; Martin 2023; Ploner 2017). As international students move across spaces, they establish new networks and circuits of identity in response to changing linguistic, cultural, and institutional landscapes (Brooks and Waters 2011). Through this process, they shape not only what they know but also who they are and who they (aspire to) become. Language is central here, not only as a means of communication but as a spatially situated medium through which belonging and positioning are enacted (see Soltani, Tran, and Reza 2022).

Over time, as she immerses herself in the German-speaking environment, Sofia experiences an ongoing process of ‘becoming more German’ through language acquisition and social interaction:

I'm becoming a bit more German (...) I think there's some German things about me, but I do definitely feel more Spanish. I think when people ask, and you don't really want to get into a big deep conversation, I just say I'm Spanish. I think I often omit that German part of myself which is also just one of the reasons why I wanted to come here to acknowledge it a little bit. And I think it's working because now I introduce myself and with a bit of luck people won't catch that I'm actually a bit uncomfortable with the language. So, with a bit of luck people won't really question whether I'm German or not and then the default is just I am German so that is quite nice. I do actually like that, and it does feel like I'm honouring that side of me a little bit, but I very much feel more Spanish just because I guess that is the base if anything happens.

Her account highlights the tension between her Spanish identity and the emerging German identity she is cultivating. This reflects Marginson's (2014) notion of international students in disequilibrium, where hybrid identities form through multiple cultural influences. Though she feels some discomfort in German, Sofia consciously embraces aspects of that identity, positioning herself as German in some contexts while retaining strong Spanish roots. At times, she omits her German identity altogether, demonstrating reflexive agency in managing her self-presentation (see Klemenčič 2015; Marginson 2024; Soltani and Tran 2023). Outside the classroom, she has taken proactive steps, such as joining a volleyball team to practise German socially, yet in class she mainly uses English or Spanish with peers. This selective engagement suggests a spatially differentiated approach to language use, where she adopts German in contexts where it feels useful or achievable. Her movements across classrooms, sports clubs, and informal social settings illustrate how mobility is lived not only through transnational relocation, but also through multi-scalar movement across everyday linguistic and social spaces within the host context. These movements involve uneven patterns of participation, recognition, and access, shaped by the linguistic expectations attached to particular environments, thereby linking everyday mobility practices to broader structures of inclusion and exclusion. Rather than uniformly embracing one identity, Sofia adapts across settings, demonstrating agency in how she negotiates belonging. This flexibility illustrates how she mobilises cultural capital as part of her self-formation, gaining recognition in different social spaces (Bourdieu 1997).

Following Sofia's navigation of linguistic and cultural identity in Germany, Ramone's journey in Denmark offers a different but equally complex perspective. Originally from the UK, Ramone moved to Denmark nearly nine years ago with his then-girlfriend. Unlike many international students who come specifically for HE, his path combined work and study. Before enrolling at university, he spent several years working in cafés, where everyday interactions exposed him to Danish society. He later pursued a bachelor's degree and is now completing his master's. Despite his long stay, Ramone remains self-conscious about his Danish, worrying that others judge his skills as inadequate: ‘In my mind, I've got this sign hanging over my head: He's been here nine years, and his Danish is not that good’. Yet, he acknowledges that this anxiety is largely self-imposed, as most people have no reason to know how long he has been in Denmark or what level of proficiency they should expect. Echoing Sofia's reflections, he notes how language shapes not only communication but self-presentation: ‘It's also that thing of feeling like you can't really express who you are, not just express yourself verbally, but express your personality’. At one point, Ramone even feared he was ‘forgetting how to speak English’, deliberately avoiding Danish and returning to English to reassert a sense of home. Although he now views this fear as misplaced, it reveals how linguistic shifts can unsettle belonging and self-perception (see Ou and Gu 2020, 2021). His alternating eagerness to integrate through Danish, and later withdrawal from it, illustrates the fluidity of identity in transnational spaces (see Kaya 2020; Prazeres 2018). It also reflects the temporal and non-linear dimensions of mobility, whereby orientations towards language, settlement, and belonging shift in response to changing

aspirations and imagined futures (e.g. Harris, Baldassar, and Robertson 2020; Martin 2025). As his future plans changed, so too did his relationship with Danish. Initially, Ramone embraced it enthusiastically, but this faded once he decided to return to the UK after his master's:

Sometimes I'll speak Danish, sometimes I'll speak English. I'll see just how I feel and try not to put too much pressure on myself (...) I'm not struggling anymore with like, oh, I really need to become Danish or learn Danish or fit in and have a long-term life here and settle down here.

His 'big phases' with the language – from enthusiasm and active engagement to distance – show that self-formation is not linear but shaped by changing contexts and expectations (see Schneider 2025). Ramone's evolving stance demonstrates agency as both action and reflection, enabling him to adapt to a shifting socio-cultural environment (see Ly and Gomes 2017). As he let go of the pressure to 'become Danish', he was able to navigate identity and belonging more comfortably, illustrating Klemenčič's (2015) argument that agency is both a condition for and outcome of self-formation.

Akyia and Carol, both from China, explained that their choice to study in the UK was influenced by the relative ease of using English. Studying in a country where English was not widely spoken felt daunting, as daily interactions would have been harder to manage. In the UK, universities offer clubs, societies, and extracurricular activities largely in English, making it easier for international students to participate academically and socially without standing out. Yet, as research shows, differences in fluency, accent, and confidence still shape experiences of belonging and positioning (Ennsner-Kananen, Halonen, and Saarinen 2021; Park 2022; Yeo et al. 2019). However, this relative ease should not be read as linguistic neutrality, as English proficiency is itself unevenly distributed and valued across transnational educational spaces. By contrast, in countries like Denmark and Germany, community engagement through clubs, sports, and informal gatherings often relies on the local language. Because these activities largely take place beyond the university, students must actively seek opportunities and engage with local languages to varying degrees. These differences highlight how mobility is organised through distinct national and linguistic infrastructures that shape possibilities for participation across both transnational study choices and everyday local engagement. Across broadly comparable European contexts, different linguistic environments produce distinct geographies of participation for international students. Mio, a student from Japan, initially assumed English would be sufficient in Germany. His expectation quickly changed when he discovered the dominance of German in daily interactions:

After coming to [Germany], I stopped playing football (...) I was expecting that, well, it's Europe, so, everyone speaks English. So, I don't need to learn German at all. That's what I thought. But now, I realised, oh, they don't speak [English].

He elaborated: 'I don't know where to go [...] if I speak [German], then I will go everywhere, but because I don't speak a lot, I feel like maybe I will not do it'. Lacking fluency, Mio withdrew from social activities such as football and avoided certain spaces. Although his scholarship covers German courses, Mio consciously opts to invest his time in furthering his academic work, including publications from his previous research assistant position in Australia. This choice reflects agency; he actively weighs language learning against professional advancement, focusing on what he believes will secure a PhD position. At the same time, this decision is shaped by broader linguistic hierarchies in which English functions as a globally privileged academic language, enabling continued mobility and accumulation of academic capital without equivalent investment in additional European languages.

Like Sofia and Ramone, Mio shows how students navigate competing demands, using agency to align identity with evolving aspirations. His decision not to invest heavily in German also reflects an awareness of linguistic limitations; he already feels less fluent in English than peers, making German seem an even greater challenge. Yet his ability to assess priorities, direct efforts

towards academic goals, and allocate time strategically illustrates strong self-regulatory dispositions (see Klemenčič 2015). Intentional self-development enhances agency. Students who mobilise knowledge, skills, and resources are better equipped to interpret their socio-structural context and act in pursuit of their goals, with agency functioning as both a condition and a product of self-formation (Klemenčič 2015; Marginson 2024).

Language, education, and migration: navigating pathways to long-term settlement

Reigan, an Iranian student living in Germany, initially planned to study abroad in Canada or the USA, with the goal not only of furthering her education but also of permanently settling there. Her aspirations were shaped by a global geography of English-speaking destinations that are widely imagined as more accessible sites of long-term settlement. Reflecting on her original goals, she said:

I mean foreign people prefer English countries rather than other countries, so for me that makes sense; people go to England. I mean I myself never thought someday I'd be here; I mean it was not in my plan, not at all! (...) My plan was to go to Canada or either the U.S., but not here, never.

For Reigan, the appeal of English-speaking countries was clear, as she imagined better prospects for staying long-term after graduation due to the language. She explained that also many of her friends, including her sister who now lives in Canada, left Iran seeking better opportunities abroad, often prioritising language compatibility. As she shared:

I prefer English language countries. I mean in terms of the language of course but then also what happens after your studies if you want to stay in the country. But like most of my friends they went to England just because of the language. Because they felt like they cannot learn new language now. They are too old to start new language. So, they didn't even try.

This reflects the pull of English-speaking countries (Díaz 2018; Waters and Brooks 2021), where language barriers are often assumed to be less of a challenge. It also shows how student mobility is often shaped by more than education alone. Decisions are embedded within uneven global geographies of opportunity, where language aligns with perceived futures of mobility and settlement (see Bai, Nam, and English 2024). Reigan's trajectory shifted when she moved to Germany, largely due to her partner's established life there. In Germany, she faced the challenge of learning a new language: 'It's like a nightmare for lots of people learning new language ... and German, it's not an easy language'. For Reigan, language is not just a means for communication but directly tied to her education and long-term settlement prospects, illustrating the interconnection between migration and HE (Robertson 2013).

Molly, a student from the USA studying in Denmark, also saw HE as her 'ticket into the country', treating study as a pathway to migration. Unlike Reigan, who had to adjust her plans to include German, Molly actively embraced Danish from the start, considering it essential to her future in Denmark. Yet, despite her enthusiasm, she quickly encountered the difficulties of language acquisition:

I was really excited. I had to learn Danish. And then I felt really discouraged. Just ... it's just really hard (...) that was a big challenge in the beginning. And then just like wondering about the implications. Will I ever learn it? And what are the implications of that? I want to stay here long term.

Molly was conscious of the broader implications of language acquisition but found the learning process challenging, recognising that attending classes once a week was insufficient for significant progress. Balancing studies with language learning felt exhausting: 'I felt like it was like pulling teeth every Monday to drag myself to class'. Her determination shows how language learning can be less about daily survival than about securing a future in the host country (see

Mathies and Karhunen 2021). Like Reigan, Molly saw mastery of the local language as key to remaining after graduation.

By contrast, international students in the UK often framed long-term settlement concerns around visa rules and job opportunities rather than language. Still, Yana's case illustrates how language requirements can directly shape migration prospects. Moving from India with her husband, she initially struggled to enter the labour market and pursued a master's degree partly to meet formal English requirements:

For international student, there is an English criteria. So, every time if you are applying (...) or if any company is ready to sponsor you, they need a kind of English test for you. So, if we're doing an international degree that is not applicable to you anymore. So, like if I complete my master degree now, I don't have to prove my English language proficiency to anyone.

Yana's case shows how HE can function not only as career advancement but as a means to bypass testing regimes and satisfy structural requirements. Language, in this sense, operates both as a resource of agency, enabling students to pursue employment and residency, and as a structural constraint, entangled with visa regulations and bureaucratic expectations (Bai, Nam, and English 2024; Sawir et al. 2012).

In Denmark, although free language courses are available, many international students deprioritised them, citing the ubiquity of English. Peter, who has lived there for nearly a decade, acknowledged understanding Danish but never committing to fluency:

I definitely could have learned some Danish or be actually fluent in Danish by this time. But also, the fact that every single person speaks perfect English, and all my Danish friends just don't speak to me in Danish. They're like, at this point, hey, just don't bother, we speak perfect English, what's the point?

Peter's experience highlights how the widespread use of English, reduced the urgency of learning the local language. English here operates as an enabling mobility infrastructure that facilitates everyday integration while simultaneously weakening incentives for deeper linguistic embedding in the host society:

If the society would be like a situation where no one speaks English I would be definitely forced of just pure, like sheer necessity but here it's just not necessary and you easily get by with English. So yeah, I guess that's why it's very easy to become lazy and not learn Danish.

This produces a distinctive geography of linguistic accommodation, where access to social and institutional spaces does not strictly depend on the national language. Such geographies are central to contemporary mobilities, as they redistribute the labour of adaptation unevenly across linguistic groups. In contrast, in Germany, international students consistently described language as a pressing necessity. Tina, a student from South Asia, noted difficulties in both social and institutional settings:

I worked a little while in a restaurant as well. There were people from different countries, but they all spoke German and then you might not speak English. So, I know it's my fault. I would say I'm not learning German. I mean I am, but I'm not fluent yet. It's been two years. I'm trying. I'm trying. So, it was hard for me there.

She described similar challenges in bureaucratic encounters, where staff often refused to use English despite being capable:

When I go to the doctor he speaks in German. And I'm like, please, English (...) He was so rude to me. And at some point, I was literally scared to go there (...) When I would request him to speak in English, he would look at me really weirdly and rudely say that, why aren't you speaking German? (...) It has also happened on the receptions for doctors. They say that they speak in English because I check the reviews every time like do they speak in English. Are they fluent? Will they be able to understand me? And then they very rudely say, Nein, Deutsch. And then they actually embarrass me on that. You're living in Germany. Speak German. I know, I'm trying.

Such experiences left her frustrated and personally accountable (see also Lee and Anderson 2009), yet also motivated, pushing her to set weekly language-learning goals aimed not only at managing daily life but also at realising her long-term plans in Germany.

Following Tina's reflections on the challenges of navigating daily life without fluency in German, broader questions emerge about the role of language in shaping students' migration and citizenship aspirations. For many international students, proficiency in the local language is not only a tool for social interaction but also a critical factor in securing employment and long-term residency. Jeffrey from Canada, for example, highlighted how language proficiency can become a decisive factor in job opportunities:

Looking for work in Germany can be also quite difficult if you don't speak German. And I'm not sure how systematically how that can be approached because when it comes down to if I have the exact same credentials and the exact interview strength as another candidate, but they speak German there would be generally just immediately taken over a non-German speaker.

Jeffrey observed that in Germany, not speaking the local language could significantly restrict job opportunities, with access to German language education also posing a financial burden:

I thought that maybe because there's always on the news that the EU ... Germany is trying to obtain more workers and trying to lower their requirements, but then the system to give you German speaking skills isn't all there yet because you also have to pay for German language and it's not cheap as students here (...) And if you're a new immigrant or something, that's a lot of money depending on what work you have.

Here, linguistic competence is unevenly distributed through economic and institutional geographies, shaping who can convert education into settlement. For others, language also carried legal weight. Michelle, from the US, framed her studies as part of a strategy to secure German citizenship, which she saw as a gateway to Europe:

Well, my family is very European. So, most of my family is still in Europe (...) And so, I've explored more of Europe than I have of America (...) I also like traveling, and I want to have a European passport because I'm here all the time.

The recent changes to German citizenship laws² (see Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2024) made language learning an even more strategic investment for Michelle. She planned to take German courses alongside her studies, ensuring she would reach C1³ proficiency within three years. The ability to retain her American passport while gaining German citizenship added to the appeal:

That's one of the things that they changed with the law this year that you don't have to give up other citizenships. I would not give up my American one. If I had to, then I would just stay as a permanent resident or something ... But I like it here.

Together, these accounts illustrate how language functions differently across contexts. In Denmark, English reduces the pressure to learn the local language, while in Germany, German proficiency is essential for navigating daily life, securing jobs, and even attaining citizenship. In the UK, English offers a shared medium that facilitates social and academic participation, yet regulatory requirements mean that some students, depending often on nationality, must still demonstrate language proficiency to access certain employment opportunities or visas. Across all three settings, language is thus both a barrier and an enabler. It structures social and academic engagement, mediates professional and migration opportunities, and intersects with legal frameworks governing settlement, work, and citizenship.

Conclusion

In this article, we have advanced an account of language as a central and spatially situated dimension of ISM, shaping educational trajectories as well as everyday negotiations of identity,

belonging, and participation across different contexts. The concept of ‘self-formation’ as developed by Marginson (2014, 2024), and the related emphasis on ‘becoming’ as theorised by Tran (2016), help alert us to the ways in which agency can play out in how mobile students engage with language during their time abroad. Through the empirical material, we have shown how students made their own decisions to use a particular language in some specific spaces but not others. In other cases, they actively embraced the language of the host country as part of an emerging hybrid identity. These practices highlight how language is embedded within multiple forms of mobility, as students move across classrooms, campuses, workplaces, social arenas, and national contexts that afford different possibilities for participation, belonging, and future movement. We are not, however, arguing that international students are ‘free floating’ individuals, unaffected by the particular social and national contexts in which they are located. Rather, our analysis demonstrates how processes of self-formation through language are always mediated by broader geographical and structural conditions, including institutional norms, language expectations and requirements in different national contexts, and uneven access to linguistic resources. Attending to students’ everyday negotiations of language allows us to capture the emotional, embodied, and temporal dimensions of these processes, including ambivalence, frustration, experimentation, and moments of resistance. Such an approach challenges linear accounts of adaptation and integration, instead recognising that identity formation is uneven, context-dependent, and shaped by multiple spatial and temporal horizons. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of social reproduction, illustrating both the possibilities for transformation and the limits imposed by enduring structural constraints. At the same time, our analysis highlights that the widespread use of English as a lingua franca is not a neutral condition of internationalisation. While English can facilitate participation and mobility, it also shapes unequal linguistic hierarchies, influencing which linguistic resources are recognised, rewarded, or rendered less necessary across different educational and social contexts.

Situating these processes of language use and self-formation more explicitly, we have also drawn on the concept of the ‘education-migration nexus’ (Robertson 2013). This perspective locates students’ linguistic practices and aspirations within wider geographies of mobility, labour markets, and citizenship. While not all international students pursue education abroad with the intention of long-term settlement, our analysis shows that language frequently becomes a decisive factor in shaping post-study opportunities and imagined futures. National contexts differ markedly in how language mediates access to work, residency, and citizenship, and these differences continue to shape students’ experiences in powerful ways. By bringing the education-migration nexus into dialogue with questions of language and identity, we show how students’ agentic practices are structured by uneven policy landscapes and mobility infrastructures. This also highlights that the widespread use of English as a lingua franca is not a neutral feature of internationalisation but one that can reproduce unequal linguistic hierarchies and shape which linguistic resources are recognised and rewarded. The framework further enables stronger connections between research in education and scholarship in sociology and human geography, which has long examined the broader forces underpinning ISM (e.g. Ong 1999; Waters 2006).

To conclude, we emphasise the importance of understanding language as a constitutive element of international student experiences, rather than as a narrow question of individual proficiency. While institutional support for language development remains crucial, an exclusive focus on skills and deficits risks obscuring the broader social, geographical and political conditions within which language use takes place. The novelty of the perspective we have advanced in this article – i.e. viewing language through the lens of self-formation and situating these processes within the education-migration nexus – provides, we contend, a more integrated account of the place of language within ISM that foregrounds agency without losing sight of structural constraints. It also draws attention to how linguistic opportunities and barriers are unevenly distributed across different contexts, shaping students’ identities, senses of belonging, mobility trajectories, and future possibilities.

Notes

1. In this study, “key informants” refers to international students who participated in interviews. Other cohort members were observed but did not take part in interviews.
2. Germany’s updated nationality law, which came into effect in June 2024, allows multiple citizenship. Foreigners can now apply for citizenship after five years of legal residence instead of the previous eight. Those who demonstrate a high level of integration, such as strong German language skills, professional achievements, or active in volunteering, may qualify for naturalisation in just three years.
3. Levels can be broadly defined as A1 (Elementary), A2 (Pre-intermediate), B1 (Intermediate), B2 (Upper intermediate), C1 (Advanced), and C2 (Proficiency), following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the research participants who gave up their time to be involved in this project. In addition, Vera would like to thank the University of Surrey for the award of a PhD studentship that enabled her to conduct the empirical research discussed in this article.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

Funding

This project was funded by the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey. The empirical research discussed in this article was funded by a PhD studentship from the University of Surrey awarded to Vera Spangler

Research ethics and consent

All participants in this study provided informed consent prior to taking part. Written consent covered participation in the research and the use of anonymised quotations in publications arising from the study. Participants were informed about the aims of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and how their data would be used and stored. No identifiable information is included in the published material.

ORCID

Vera Spangler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5761-8421>

Rachel Brooks  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8692-1673>

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of the research, supporting data are not available for ethical reasons.

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