

# EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE BARRIER AND THE POOR PERFORMANCE OF BAME/INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM UNIVERSITIES

**P. Alunyo Bello, Michael Opoku Agyeman**

*Centre for Advancement of Race Equality (CARE), University of Northampton  
(UNITED KINGDOM)*

## **Abstract**

In recent years, the number of BAME/International students has been on a steady increase as many migrate from their home countries into the United Kingdom to advance their graduate studies in British universities. In spite that most BAME students migrate to the United Kingdom for the purpose of education, their poor academic performance has however been an observable trend. While many works of literature have sought to investigate the reasons behind this unpleasant trend, some have offered a very interesting perspective to the discourse as to the fact that BAME students experience some obstacles which partially affect them in adjusting to the environmental, educational, and cultural lifestyle. Notably, the obstacles affect the BAME students' chances of graduating with good grades than their British colleagues in UK universities. While this is believed mostly amongst BAME students, it remains, at best, a conjecture. Thus, this study shall examine how BAME students from Asian and African nations change when they enrol in a campus-based university in the UK to pursue their diverse academic goals. To achieve this, quantitative and qualitative research methods will be adopted to empirically explore the language barrier, cultural differences, and issues encountered by the BAME students at postgraduate level in the UK universities. Furthermore, a face-to-face interview and questionnaires will be adopted to gather data from students in the College. Survey and interview questions will be shared amongst students to ascertain their perception of schooling, grade performance in respect to the challenges mentioned above.

Keywords: Language and Culture Barriers, International Students, Academic Progress.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Language barrier and cultural differences has a big impact on academic progress of students in the university. This study examines how postgraduate students from Asian and African nations change when they enrol in a campus-base university in the UK to pursue their diverse academic goals. Foreign students are enrolling in higher education in greater numbers of foreign students. It is often reported that foreign students from different home countries face challenges in respect to language capability, cultural differences in terms of food, cultural activities, etc., academic expectations and social integration (Heikinheimo and Shute, 1986; Biggs, 1999; Brown, 2007). Language barrier is a very serious and critical issue when it comes to western academics as it greatly affects BAME students. This makes them not to comprehend with the tutors teaching in classrooms and they also find it difficult with interacting with other students so as to put them through in their academics. For numerous foreign students, proficiency in the English language is a major and important concern as it is a key factor to academic success and social integration (Heikinheimo and Shute 1986; Badur 2003). Zhou and Todman (2009). Also, in most cases many BAME students find it difficult to adapt to the ascents of UK lecturers and professors. From this review it is deduced that without language communication there will be no form of learning. Language capability as influential in easing the progression of postgraduate BAME students studying in the UK. Language is clearly central to academic performance but there are other problems of academic adjustment. For instance, Holmes (2005) believed that Confucian society attributed success to a person's personal willpower rather than talent. The emphasis on effort in Confucian education is frequently represented through rote learning and memorization. As a result of these challenges, the BAME students cannot make contributions to group, class, and seminar discussions, let alone arguing with their tutors or peers. Additionally, a lot of Asian and Black students want to take a timed exam and can be uncomfortable with more thorough forms of evaluation (Badur 2003). Furthermore, according to Simpson and Tan (2009), many of the difficulties that Black and East Asian students have at the administrative, academic, and support service levels are related to interpersonal interactions.

A lot of BAME students go to the length of getting private tutors to assist and put them through in their various academic activities so as to meet up with their academics. International students also encounter difficulties making friends with local students and interacting socially with them, albeit these hurdles are still tied to language and academic difficulties. In a survey of Chinese students in the UK conducted by Zeng (1997), it was discovered that cultural prejudices and communication difficulties forced students to engage in more solitary pastimes. International students experienced more problems than domestic students during their initial transition to higher education, according to a study by Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) conducted in the US. According to Campbell and Li (2008) and Chen (2006), Asian students from high context collectivist cultures found self-disclosure to be a challenging aspect of forming friendships with home students. Campbell and Li (2008) reported that it was difficult for Asian students to make friends with local students in New Zealand. In contrast, Ward (2006) found that although domestic students had favourable impressions of foreign students, they were generally reluctant to make contact. In fact, foreign students frequently believed that it was their responsibility to make the effort to make friends. Many ideas have been put out to help travellers from abroad. First, they should go into the experience with reasonable expectations (Zhou and Todman 2009), and in this regard, both Brown (2007) and Simpson and Tan (2009) raise worry about how the international student experience is marketed. In addition to a natural desire to learn, students should be curious about their new environment. People who feel under pressure frequently have fewer fulfilling and successful experiences (Chirkov et al. 2008). Before starting their primary course of study, pre-session courses can help with linguistic and academic integration. However, rather than offering a general course as is frequently offered, these should be more tailored to the specific courses and departments that students would enrol in (Chen 2007). In this situation, it makes the case for an expanded definition of "study skills" and regard literacy as involving social activities in addition to text decoding. The tutor should gain a better knowledge of how foreign students are inclined to learn in their native environments (Bamford 2008). Universities cannot foster connections between international and domestic students, but instructors can do so by utilising teaching techniques like group projects and by supporting peer mentorship programmes (Sawir et al. 2008). Finally, students themselves can create local, national, or international groups to aid one another (Montgomery and McDowell 2009). Such categories ought to be viewed as simplifying the integration process rather than as its replacement. To learn more about the BAME students' perspectives on the necessity to succeed academically while working with private tutors, a survey will be undertaken.

This research aims to investigate how language and cultural disparities affect the academic performance of BAME students in the United Kingdom. Many researchers/experts have thoroughly studied the implications of language barrier differences and cultural differences in the UK postgraduate university students. Prior to this, the experts have also studied how these factors influence the grades and performance of international students in UK universities, Borrett and Zysk. (2013). UK universities should initiate a means of assisting the BAME students with these challenges aforementioned. To achieve this, the following objectives shall be explored:

- Does language barriers and cultural differences affect the performance of international students?
- How do students comprehend to lectures in classrooms?
- Do students with these aforementioned challenges feel pressured and pay less concentration to their academics.
- What roles does self-motivation and reliance play in ensuring academic expectations are met during these challenges.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The secret to one's unique identity is language. It facilitates the expression of emotions, the sharing of experiences, the telling of stories, and the transmission of sophisticated ideas and information. The best way for us to communicate, share our opinions, and comprehend one another is through language, Imberti (2007) in Mattila and Kyoo Kim (2011). It can be identified as a conceptual sign system to help us communicate. It also provides us with a significant reference formation and a relational context that represents our identities. Even those who struggle with ascent disabilities use sign languages to communicate since engagement without language is impossible. The engagement appears to be challenging when the languages of the parties involved are different. The term "language barrier" refers to the inability to communicate when the speaker and the listener do not use the same language and vocabulary. This merely suggests that there won't be understanding if neither party can communicate effectively. According to Friedman (2018), the language barrier is the absence of a shared language

that prevents two or more people from verbally conversing with one another. According to Friedman (2018), the language barrier is when two or more people are unable to communicate verbally because they do not speak the same language. Otherwise, he or she will find it very difficult to understand what they are saying because everything sounds strange to him or her. According to a study by Fulkingham et al. (2021), overseas students are responsible for nearly £10.8 billion of the UK's export revenue. The goal of all language studies, along with the use of English, is to engage and communicate in the necessary language effectively, according to Wardani and Tono (2019). But notwithstanding, the pronunciation of English learning target must be looked into critically as it is very paramount in communications and interactions. All international language learners encounter problems such as ensuring that they get the right pronunciation when speaking. There are so many factors which cause difficulties. So many researchers concur that native/local language, age, exposure and encouragement do have a great influence on the pronunciation of the students. According to a study by Ward et al., there is a significant link between cultural stress and host country connectedness. For international students, cultural differences present an additional difficulty. They need some time to integrate into and adapt to the new surroundings and culture; the length of time depends on how closely the new culture resembles their own. For instance, compared to other international students from Asia, those arriving from the UK's neighbouring nations do not need as much time to adapt to UK English, culture, and lifestyle in general. Students having limited leave to stay in the UK most at times neglect the cultural awareness part of their lives and fail to gain the required excellent grades in their academic pursuit.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

For this research to be studied and examined without bias, a realistic approach is necessary. We'll employ a hybrid technique that combines quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry. The sample size will determine how the data from the surveys and interviews are interpreted. To emphasise student perception, the qualitative approach will be applied. Additionally, it will aid in placing qualitative factors including but not restricted to feelings, health, family history, etc. in perspective. Combining data and human perception will give a clear picture of the many effects that linguistic and cultural obstacles have on BAME students' academic performance, which ultimately results in inferior grades.

#### **3.1 Research methodology**

A combined methodology of quantitative and qualitative approaches will be employed for this research study. A quantitative survey will be used to collect and gather data from African and Asian students at the university of Northampton for three weeks. A qualitative interview will also be used to collect and gather informative data by collating two variables of students that are involved in private tutorials in order to meet up with their academics. The report from this study will aid to draw influence on how private and personal tutorials have impact on the academic performance among students in the Black and Asian communities. The survey will also aim to ask about students' academic expectations, experiences with private tutorials sessions and how they have been able to cope in their various fields of academics. A control group of students without these challenges and challenges as well will also be surveyed to know about their experience and academic motivations for study of their various courses. A sample size of 50 students will be surveyed to get their own opinion on personal experience and will be used to draw the research impact. On the other hand, the questionnaire will be shared across African and Asian student communities. From this, the analysis and result/findings of this research will then be compared to previous challenges of language barriers and cultural differences on students' academic performance to draw a conclusive aid, invalid or arguments mostly among African and Asian ethnic minorities.

#### **3.2 Data analysis**

This research was undertaken in August 2022. Following the close of the survey on the 7th of August, 2022, the raw survey data was collected on an excel sheet for analysis. All analyses were carried out using qualitative content analysis to obtain categories, and patterns to understand very comprehensive expressions (Grbich 2013). In this respect, researchers read and re-read the data to get acquainted with the information, take notes, and create some meaningful units.

Essentially, the major type of data analysis to be considered in this project is inferential analysis. It is important to note that inferential analysis draws conclusions based on hypothetical facts, and this is what makes it fundamentally different from descriptive statistics which merely summarizes precisely measured data. The inferential method of analysis, as described by Nieswiadomy (2008), are the group of statistics concerned with the characteristics of a population and uses sample data to make an

inference about a population (Nieswiadomy, 2008). This method has also been described as a manner of drawing inferences or conclusions based on a set of observations or observable data. But more succinctly, inferential analysis involves the use of limited available samples to make generalizations about the population from which the sample was drawn. Notably, the demographic survey conducted for the purpose of this study received a sum total of 24 respondents. Originally, the author wished to draw responses from over 50 interested participants to give room for more credibility and assertiveness. However, attempts to get as many participants to respond and complete the survey were unsuccessful.

It is important to note that inferential analysis arise out of the fact that sampling naturally incurs sampling errors. As such, the samples recorded from the respondents in this study are not expected to perfectly and accurately represent and depict the views and perspectives of the population from where they were drawn.

**4 RESULTS**

The first part of the survey questionnaire conducted for the purpose of this study sought an inquiry into the demography of the respondents. The survey received a sum total of 24 respondents with many of the respondents between the age range of 26 and 32.

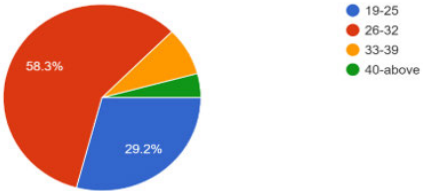


Figure 1: Age range of respondents

Similarly, approximately 54% of these respondents claim to be male with the other 46% being female.

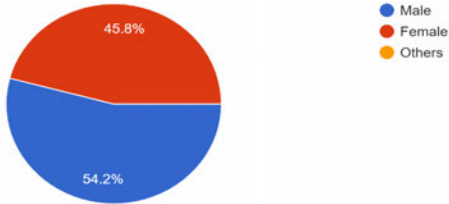


Figure 2: Sex of respondents

It is important to also state that all these respondents are international students in the United Kingdom. The breakdown of their nationalities however revealed that a great percentage of them (approximately 71%) were from Nigeria and the other 29% from Asia including China, Japan, India and some other non-English speaking countries.

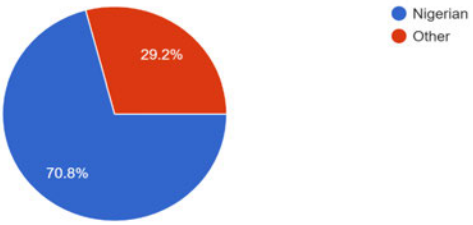


Figure 3: Nationality of respondents

The second part of the survey questionnaire was tagged job situation and motivation for undertaking graduate studies or degrees in the United Kingdom. This section of the survey questionnaire investigated majorly the working experience of the respondents before proceeding to graduate schools, the language proficiency skills of the respondents, and the reason/ motivation for their enrollment into a graduate study program.

When asked if they had worked in the time between their undergraduate degree and starting their masters (or pre-masters as the case may be) in any graduate school in the United Kingdom, 25% of the respondents remarked that they did not work. Another 29% noted that they had worked part-time and 45% of them confessed to having worked full-time before proceeding to graduate school.



Figure 4: Work experience of the respondents

In an attempt to investigate why the respondents embarked on graduate studies, they rated the improvement of their language skills on a scale of 1 to 7. About 29% strongly agree that they embarked on a graduate study in the UK as an effort to boost their English language proficiency. A cumulative of over 48% mildly agree while close to 10% strongly disagree.

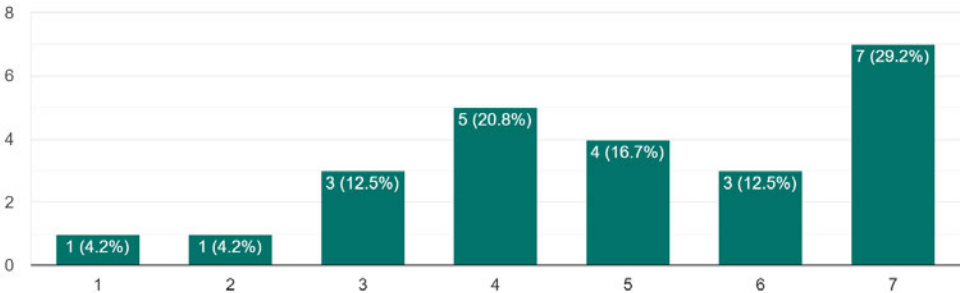


Figure 5: Language skill as a reason for undertaking graduate studies.

Similarly, another identified reason people embark on graduate studies is for the purpose of advancing their professional careers. Many of the respondents seem to align with this reason judging from the result of the survey as displayed below. Over 60% of the respondents embarked on graduate studies to advance their professional careers.

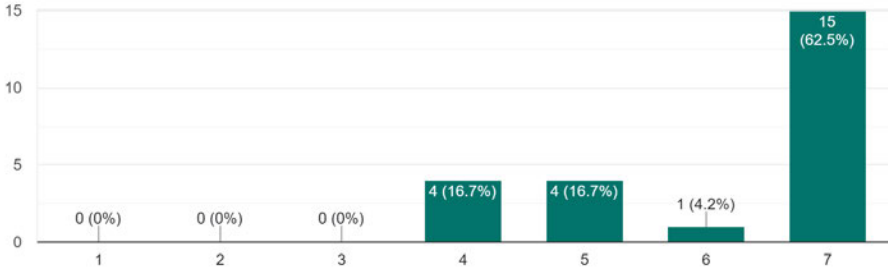


Figure 6: Advancement in a professional career as a reason for undertaking graduate studies

Many others that do not embark on the graduate program to either improve their language proficiency and skill or to advance their professional world did it to complement, enhance or gain insight into either academia or technical training.

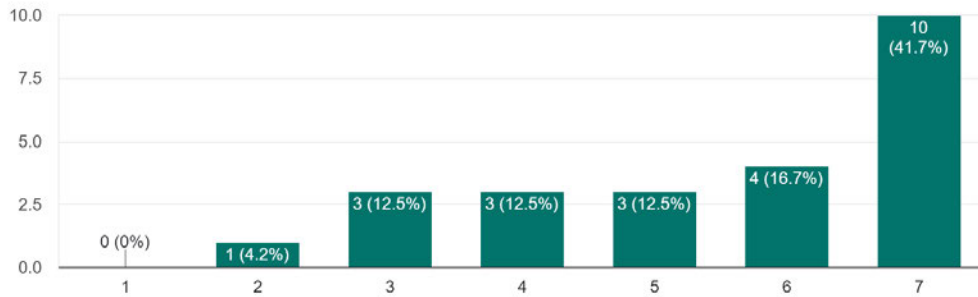


Figure 7: Complementing/ Enhancing Academia or Technical Training as a reason for undertaking graduate studies

Additionally, as revealed by the survey results, people also agree that students in the UK undertake a graduate programme in an attempt to change their area of study from a previously-obtained degree or training.

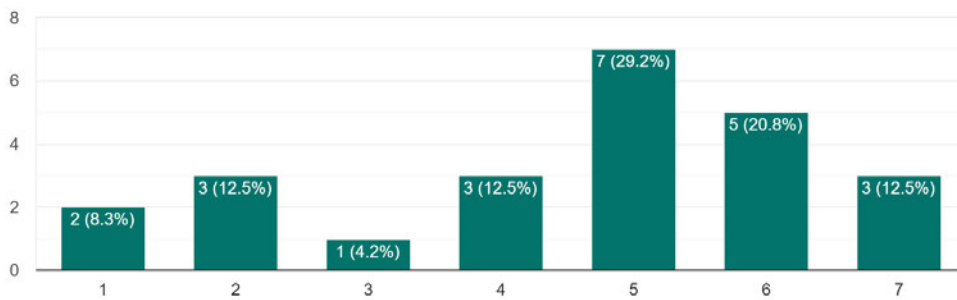


Figure 8

The next section of the survey inquired into the many reasons responsible for the poor performance of the international students. This section featured reasons like language barrier and cultural differences, personal factors causing a psychological distance between them and their respective foreign counterparts, and difficulty in gaining awareness of the academic system. When asked how they feel about how their cultural and language barriers affect their academic progress and performance, 16% said the effect is very much, 58% said there is a very little effect, another 16% of the respondents were not sure and 8% of them stated that their language and the cultural barrier has no effect in the least on their academic performance.

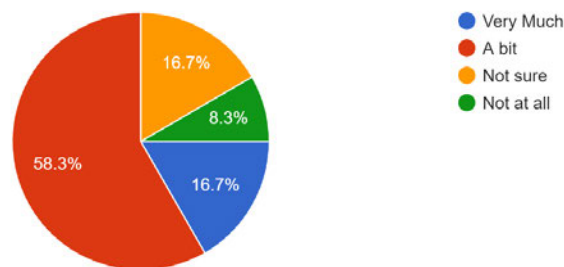


Figure 9

Moving on, when asked if they often encounter problems while communicating with their teachers in and outside of the classrooms, 54% of the respondents answered that they rarely encounter problems communicating with their mates or teachers. Another 25% stated that they sometimes encounter problems and about 12.5% stated that they often encounter problems in communication.

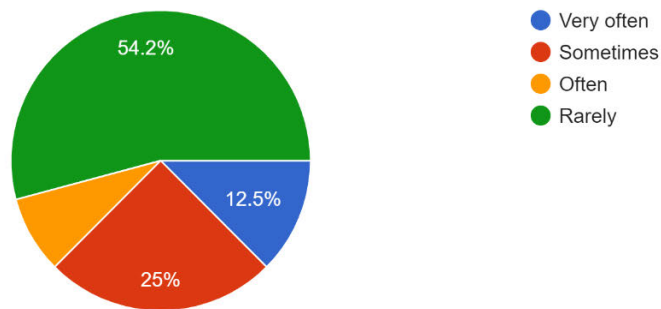


Figure 10

The survey further asked the respondents what other reasons and factors are responsible for the difficulties in their respective graduate studies. Many noted that it is due to stress, others noted that it is because of their lack of knowledge. Lack of proficiency in the English language and the intensity of the program due to their short timeline also featured in their answers.

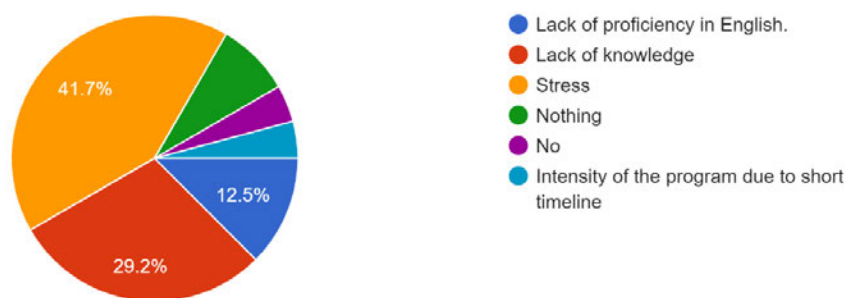


Figure 11

#### 4.1 Discussion of findings

The responses from the survey and interview conducted support the narrative advanced by the literature review. Notably, a number of works of literature have established that so many factors and circumstances are responsible for the poor performance of BAME and international students in their academic pursuits. This is majorly in an attempt to investigate the attainment gap in degree outcome between BAME and British higher education students. Of all these factors and circumstances, language barrier stands out and has in fact not been widely explored. Hence, the motivation for this study.

An extensive assessment of the findings of the study shows that the language barrier is a problem among international students undergoing their graduate programme in the UK, as the same affect their academic performance and excellence. As evidenced in Figure 3, a number of the respondents were not from English-speaking countries thus making them vulnerable to the identified problem being examined in this research. Notably, a great percentage of the respondents (approximately 71%) were from Nigeria and the other 29% are collectively from China, Japan, and India.

Instructively, language proficiency may have a profound effect on an individual's ability to learn and develop, due to its key role in the transmission of information and regulation of cognitive processes (Binder & Smith, 2013). As advanced by Baker (2001), when focusing on language proficiency, the communicative purpose of language is of primary importance. This is because the ability to communicate effectively is vital in the measurement of a person's capability to perform socially and academically (Young, Sercombe, Sachdev, Naeb, & Schartner, 2013). As a result, language fluency is a major determinant of successful integration. However, Figures 9 and 10 of the results of findings give a proper context to how the international students, through a representation of them by the respondents, feel their academic performances and excellence are grossly affected by the language and cultural differences. Even more, the respondents noted that it becomes extremely difficult for them to converse with their lecturers in and outside of the classroom. The language barrier, as being used in this study, does not necessarily have to do with the inability to understand the language, but more about the British using so many metaphors, jargon and terminology, which are not immediately obvious and can make no sense to them.

While one might argue, at the surface level, that this is solely about the disparity in culture, there might be a lot more to it. In other words, this author cannot turn a blind eye to the possibility of discrimination against

BAME students as a number of researchers have also explored and confirmed the same (Zwysen et al, 2021; United Nations, 2018; Jankowski, G.S., 2020). Notably, Botticello and West (2021) have noted that racial/ethnic, social, and economic inequalities underpin inequalities in UK higher education. Liana Petrova (2020) also noted that the language barrier is one of the most complex and significant issues international students face in their academic studies. According to her, most international students experience prejudice and discrimination because they feel isolated. And they feel isolated because they do not feel comfortable talking to the rest of the group mates during seminars or lectures.

Poyrazli (2003) while explaining how the language barrier directly affects the academic performance of BAME and international students, noted that the victims experience problems with writing, comprehension and reading due to limited language skills. They can also experience more anxiety related to understanding academic and grammatical jargon and the overall process of adjustment to the UK educational system

Another study conducted in two universities in Texas, the United States also discovered that international students experience social isolation when engaging in group activities which are tough for them due to that exact language barrier. The study further noted that there is a high possibility of misunderstanding and complication in communications with faculty or peers which can sometimes lead to experiencing defensiveness or even having role conflicts. Explaining what defensiveness meant in this context, the study commented that they would be the quiet ones that feel invisible and people treat them as such. While many international students would justify their quietness and defensiveness with their introverted nature, the study has found that it is majorly because they are experiencing stress, anxiety, and isolation which ultimately limits the opportunities for further development and academic success at the university.

It is also pertinent to mention that while all universities in the United Kingdom require a certain language level to be passed on either IELTS OR TOEFL tests before international students get accepted, it however does not translate to English language fluency and proficiency. Notably, it has been argued in some quarters that knowing a language theoretically does not mean it can be used in practice.

The language tests have also been discredited on the basis of them being grossly inaccurate measures of comprehension and communication skills as they only test reading and writing skills. For this reason, the disparities in pronunciations and rate of speech of native speakers or their accents and slang can also pose serious challenges. The term accent refers to the pronunciation of words in a manner associated with a certain geographical area (Thomas et al., 2014). Thus, according to Uba (1994), language difficulties such as unintelligible accents or the use of different expressions are experienced even by international students from English-speaking countries. Explaining further, it noted that international students may struggle in the beginning to take their notes because they find it too hard to understand the accent of the lecturer. They might also struggle to understand their colleagues during group workshops due to their pronunciation or even the rate of speech they have. In a research survey conducted by Nchindia (2020) which interviewed both BAME and British students, it was discovered that accent is a major barrier to communication with students. The British lecturer admitted that he has had situations where BAME students did not understand, not because of the language, but because of his accent. Meanwhile, they would find it difficult to communicate their concerns as they are worried they might be laughed at that they do not speak good English as the natives.

## **4.2 Recommendations**

This study has successfully explored one of the major challenges responsible for the poor performance of BAME and international students in the United Kingdom. Through a review of extended literature on the subject matter and the conduct of a quantitative empirical survey undertaken by the author in August 2022, this research has shown that language and cultural barriers, directly and indirectly, affect the academic performance of BAME and international students undergoing their graduate studies in the United Kingdom.

During the literature review, this research examined the importance of language generally and the need of language for effective communication. It further explored the realities of BAME students in the United Kingdom especially as it relates to the language barrier being one of the causes of their poor academic performances. To further substantiate this, this research also employed a quantitative survey in its research approach. Although the sample of the study used in the conduct of this research was small-scale as a result of time constraints and limited response rate, the author believes that this study to a very great extent depicts the obtainable realities of BAME students in the UK. Regardless, however, for more accuracy and compelling conclusions and generalizations, this author recommends that a large number of respondents should have been used and enjoins subsequent research on this subject to work



towards this. this will give room for the adoption of a descriptive method of analysis which promises more accuracy, precision, and decisiveness.

Similarly, this study failed to explore or quiz the respondents on the possible solutions to the problem identified in this research thus, constituting one of its few limitations. However, many existing works of literature have recommended practical solutions to overcome the problem explored in this research. For instance, Nchindia (2020) recommended that there should be a consensus among academics that the best way to address the problem of differential accents, is to purposely speak slowly and adjust to the student's way of speaking. This behavior, in fact, is consistent with Giles' (2016) Communication Accommodation Theory- CAT; one of which its strategies being convergence, that is, adjusting one's communicative behavior to be like another's (Dragojevic 2016)

Additionally, there should be a systemic, structural, and coordinated approach in addressing cultural issues that may emerge in the classroom. Notably, some BAME and mainstream students lack the confidence and structure to engage in purposeful and substantive intercultural interaction (Lee et al., 2018).

Finally, the major implication for policy in this study is that universities can draw lessons from here to improve and enhance their policies on diversity and multiculturalism. The study might also be useful to BAME academics who are planning to move to the UK for work, to understand the challenges and expectations of the job. Potential BAME academics living in the UK, who are planning to get into academia may find this study an important piece for their psychological preparation. This study recommends more intercultural training (Knohls & Knight, 1994) for academics based on respect for knowledge and for learner's culture and communicative economy (Riley, 2007). This training should take the form of observation, sensitization, and negotiation of identities without forcing anyone to sacrifice their own ethos and cultural identity by being modelled in the image of another (Riley, 2007).

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research has been highlighted to investigate the impact of language barrier and cultural differences on the academic performance of African and Asian postgraduate students in the UK universities and institutions. How does this challenge to African and Asian students differ from local students is a major question to be put into consideration? A question that remains un attended to is if private tutorials can be beneficial to international students with the aforementioned challenges in the UK higher universities.

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