

Article

# Language Proficiency and Academic Integration: Analyzing the Needs of University of Debrecen Staff

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**Abstract:** This study aims to examine the language challenges faced by local and international university staff at the University of Debrecen. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, a questionnaire was distributed to local colleagues to gather insights into their language-related experiences, while interviews were conducted with international colleagues to capture their unique perspectives. The findings reveal a significant demand for language courses among the university's employees. Notably, international colleagues who had access to Hungarian language courses, especially those offered by their respective faculties, demonstrated better language proficiency and overall performance. These results emphasize the critical need for comprehensive language support programs to improve the academic and professional integration of both local and international staff.

**Keywords:** Academic Carrier, Language Management, Language Barriers, Language Proficiency, Non-native Academics,

**Classification-JEL:** I21, I23,

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## INTRODUCTION

Language barriers and their consequences in multinational companies are a well-researched area (Tenzer, Terjesen & Harzing, 2017). Language barriers in the university environment are less so. Language as a means of communication is a key issue in both areas and thus has similarities. However, there are differences due to the specificities of the academic area.

International rankings serve as a significant indicator of the quality and competitiveness of higher education institutions in an increasingly globalized academic landscape. As Kovács and Kasza (2018) noted, the primary focus of internationalization in Hungary is student mobility, which plays a pivotal role in shaping the international profile of Hungarian universities. These institutions are becoming progressively more attractive to international students, resulting in a more diverse and multicultural academic environment (Kovács & Kasza, 2018).

In his analysis, Csomós (2014) explored the positioning of Hungarian universities within various international ranking systems. He observed that such rankings often place limited emphasis on the quality of teaching and education, instead prioritizing metrics such as publication output and citation counts. This observation leads to the recommendation that efforts to improve rankings should be directed toward enhancing research productivity and visibility. Csomós (2014) further highlights the discrepancy between the time researchers dedicate to teaching and the impact of publication performance on their academic career advancement, suggesting that the latter plays a disproportionately influential role.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

A questionnaire was conducted only in Hungarian, and qualitative interviews in Hungarian and English to gain insights into the perspectives of both local and international scholars working at the University of Debrecen. The initial pilot questionnaire was administered to College for Advanced Studies members, which helped refine questions before distributing the final version to the broader staff of the University of Debrecen. A total of 31 individuals completed the survey. The respondents represented the following faculties: Faculty of Economics and Business, Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Pharmacy, Faculty of Health Sciences, Faculty of Informatics, Faculty of Science and Technology,

Faculty of Law, and Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences and Environmental Management.

On average, participants have been employed at the University of Debrecen for 10 years, with employment durations ranging from 1 to 30 years. The majority of respondents hold the position of Senior Lecturer, and most of the respondents are female. Table 1 provides a summary of the collected data.

The study was further developed based on four in-depth interviews with non-Hungarian academics who have varying native languages and different durations of experience working in Hungary at the university. Two staff members from different faculties were selected for interviews: one with at least five years of experience at the University of Debrecen and another with less than five years of service. Their proficiency in the Hungarian language was also a key consideration. Interviewees with varying levels of fluency, from those who spoke the language well to those with minimal proficiency, were included. The questionnaire of local employees was extended so that international scholars could focus not only on English language skills but also on experiences with the Hungarian language.

## RESULTS

### Experiences of the local colleagues

Respondents were asked to rate their English language proficiency in both general communication and academic contexts. The findings indicate that respondents generally perceive their proficiency in general communication as higher than in academic communication. This discrepancy highlights the different demands and complexities inherent in these two forms of language use. General communication often involves everyday interactions, such as social conversations, which typically require less specialized vocabulary and simpler sentence structures. On the other hand, scientific communication requires a more formal and structured use of language (Scarcella, 2003). It involves not only the understanding and production of complex, discipline-specific vocabulary but also the ability to deal with abstract concepts, to reason logically, and to present ideas systematically. This type of communication often follows specific requirements, places greater pressure on language users regarding linguistic accuracy (Anstrom et al., 2010), and often disadvantages non-native English speakers (Flowerdew, 2013). In light of the research question concerning the impact of language barriers on teaching effectiveness, the following question was posed: "Did language barriers affect teaching

effectiveness and communication with students?" the aim was to determine the extent to which language barriers affect the effectiveness of teaching and communication with students. The data present a nuanced perspective. A total of 16% of respondents indicated that they encountered no difficulties in their teaching activities. Conversely, 77% of respondents reported that language barriers were present and had a notable impact on their teaching and communication with students. While the sample may not be representative, it nonetheless offers valuable insight into the dynamics of a university setting.

The subsequent inquiry pertained to collaboration within the research process, specifically addressing whether language barriers influenced research project participation. The responses were as follows: twelve individuals reported a slight influence, seven reported that language barriers had moderated impact on their involvement, two identified a significant influence, nine reported that they had not been affected at all.

Concerning the previous inquiry, the following question was asked: "Have language barriers affected your ability to build professional relationships with international researchers?" The responses were as follows: six respondents indicated no impact, which is three fewer than in the previous question. Eleven respondents reported a slight impact, seven reported a moderate impact, two indicated a significant, and four respondents noted a substantial impact. Additionally, one respondent chose not to provide an answer. This distribution highlights that while most respondents experienced at least some level of difficulty, there was a notable variance in the degree to which these barriers affected their professional relationships. The findings underscore the persistent challenge that language barriers pose in the academic community, particularly in international settings. This is consistent with existing literature that has explored the role of language proficiency in academic collaborations. For example, according to Tietze (2008), young researchers who are not native speakers of English need to be aware that their career progression will not be determined solely by their individual academic knowledge and expertise. In addition to this, their competence in English and their ability to actively participate in knowledge-sharing networks and professional communities will also be significant factors. Moreover, this issue can significantly affect scholars' well-being and, in extreme cases, may result in a sense of isolation, bullying or discrimination, which subsequently hinders their productivity (Pajalic et al., 2023; Mehmood et al., 2024). Neeley (2013) documented

that some workers, in a multinational company, were concerned about the potential loss of their status due to their limited language abilities.

Following the previous question, attention was turned to the publication process, a topic that has been extensively studied in the academic literature. The question posed was, "Were you affected by language barriers during the publication process?" This question aimed to delve deeper into non-native English-speaking researchers' challenges when disseminating their work in predominantly English-language academic journals. The responses were distributed as follows: fourteen individuals reported a slight impact, six indicated no, nine noted a moderate impact, and two experienced a substantial impact. The distribution of responses indicates that, while language barriers are not universally problematic, they present challenges for a substantial proportion of respondents. The most commonly reported experience was a slight impact, with 14 individuals indicating that language barriers were a minor but noticeable obstacle during the publication process.

In this study, the impact of language barriers on career development opportunities was explored as a critical factor in the professional growth of researchers, particularly in the global academic environment. The specific question posed was, "Have language barriers influenced your career development opportunities?" The responses revealed a range of experiences, reflecting the varying degrees to which language proficiency affects professional advancement. Findings suggest that, for the majority of respondents, language barriers have had little to no impact on their career development opportunities. Fourteen respondents indicated that language barriers had only a slight influence, and eight reported no influence at all. However, a notable minority reported more significant challenges, with five respondents indicating a moderate influence and three respondents (one significantly and two highly) reporting that language barriers substantially impacted their career advancement. The one respondent who chose not to answer might reflect the complexity or sensitivity of the issue, which could be perceived as a topic that may be met with stigma within the professional community (Horn, 2017).

In this study, respondents were asked to identify the areas where they experience difficulties due to language barriers. To capture the multifaceted nature of these challenges, they were given the option to select more than one area from the following: teaching, research, publishing, and administration. This approach allowed the

understanding of not only the prevalence of language-related difficulties but also their specific impact across different aspects of academic work. Among the options provided - teaching, publishing, research, and administration - teaching emerged as the most cited challenge, followed by publishing. Research and administration were less frequently mentioned, with each causing problems in only two cases.

The most frequently mentioned challenge was the difficulty understanding students' accents and the lack of English language skills. Accents can vary widely, even among speakers of the same language, and this can create communication barriers in the classroom. For educators, especially those who are non-native English speakers, deciphering different accents can add an additional layer of complexity to teaching, potentially leading to misunderstandings and reducing the effectiveness of instruction. "In addition to my own limitations, my students' lack of language skills and my difficulty in understanding their accents."

In addition to the challenges posed by students' accents and language skills, another significant educational problem identified by respondents was the difficulty of maintaining continuous speech in English during lectures. "During lectures, it is challenging to speak continuously in English, and some technical terms do not always come to mind in a foreign language. This issue is compounded by the challenge of recalling technical terms in a foreign language, which can disrupt the teaching flow and impact communication effectiveness. In the context of multinational corporate environments, Aichorn and Puck (2017) has also identified increasing anxiety regarding the use of English, which appears to be independent of the level of language proficiency.

In the context of academic publishing, respondents highlighted specific language proficiency challenges in the questionnaire's comments section. Two prevalent concerns emerged from these comments: the necessity of having publications linguistically proofread and the perception that writing in English at a non-native level hinders the publication process. "In writing, I feel that I am not speaking at a native level and that this makes publishing more difficult." This is echoed in the broader academic literature, where researchers like Warchał (2024) have highlighted that the time invested in drafting articles in English, coupled with the expenses related to professional language proofreading, can significantly delay the research process.

The question posed to respondents, "In what professional situations do you speak English? How

do you feel in these situations?" elicited a variety of responses, highlighting the different contexts in which English is used and the corresponding emotional experiences of non-native speakers. The respondents' English language skills notably impacted their confidence, particularly in professional settings such as international conferences. A recurring theme among the responses was the nervousness associated with speaking English at conferences. One respondent explicitly stated, "At a conference, I'm nervous; I prepare a lot for these situations."

This nervousness likely stems from the pressure to communicate complex ideas clearly in a non-native language while also making a positive impression on an international audience. Respondents generally reported feeling more comfortable in other professional situations, such as classes, research collaboration meetings, and everyday work interactions. One respondent noted, "Classes, research collaboration meetings, conferences in foreign languages. Neutral in terms of language, rather cultural/religious/worldview differences are confusing." This comment underscores that, while language barriers are a concern, other factors, such as cultural differences, can also significantly affect how comfortable individuals feel in professional interactions.

Using translation software such as DeepL and Google Translator emerged as the most cited solution among respondents. The widespread use of translation software reflects its accessibility and effectiveness in bridging language gaps, especially in real-time or when dealing with large volumes of text. AI tools were also frequently mentioned as a helpful resource in overcoming language barriers. Respondents appreciated these tools for their ability to save time and provide reassurance by confirming the correctness of language use. Integrating AI into academic work represents a growing trend where technology plays a central role in enhancing linguistic competence (Luczaj, Leonowicz-Bukala & Kurek-Ochmanska, 2022). To preserve the linguistic diversity of the academy, Steigerwald et al. (2022) suggested that universities should introduce courses aimed at improving the use of machine translation and a better understanding of translation technologies.

Respondents were also asked to provide suggestions for improving their institution's language support system, focusing on addressing the specific challenges they face as non-native English speakers in an academic environment. A common theme among the suggestions was the need for more specialized courses and training programs tailored to different aspects of academic and professional

communication. Respondents expressed a particular interest in courses that address the challenges of understanding and using different accents. Several respondents suggested the need for courses that are specific to various academic and professional contexts, such as education, research, presentations, and professional networking, including small talk. One respondent noted, "We need many more courses, specific to education, specific to research in different areas, specific to presentation, specific to professional chat (small talk is often the most difficult at conferences or in a professional setting)." This highlights the importance of context-specific language skills, where different scenarios require different approaches to communication. Respondents also preferred small group sessions and regular access to mother-tongue tutors. Another significant suggestion was the introduction of compulsory language training, ideally conducted in an English-speaking country. One respondent recommended "Compulsory language training, but it would be most effective if this were done abroad in an English-speaking country, e.g., in the context of short mobility programs, 1-4 weeks of intensive communication training."

To understand the availability and effectiveness of language training already provided by academic institutions, respondents were asked about their experiences with such programs. The results highlighted the mixed effectiveness of these trainings. A significant portion of respondents, 61% (19 individuals), reported that their institution had offered them language training. This indicates that many institutions recognize the importance of language support and have implemented programs to help their staff improve their English proficiency. However, the availability of training does not necessarily translate into participation or perceived effectiveness. Five respondents indicated that they had been offered language training but chose not to attend. Respondents who participated in the language training were allowed to comment on whether they found the training effective and to provide reasons if they did not. One notable comment highlighted that the effectiveness of the training was compromised because a native speaker did not teach the classes. Additionally, other respondents mentioned that online language classes were not considered effective. This may reflect the challenges associated with remote learning, such as reduced interaction, technical difficulties, and the absence of immersive, in-person experiences.

### **Experiences of the international colleagues**

The conclusions drawn from expatriate literature are highly applicable to the academic context.

Excluding foreign employees from everyday communication with host country nationals can have serious consequences, as language is a crucial tool for learning about and integrating into a new culture (Selmer & Luring, 2015). Moreover, as Pherali (2012) points out in the academic contexts, the linguistic challenges of transnational teaching are twofold, encompassing both professional and sociocultural dimensions. Social isolation and feeling different add to the stress academics face in an already stressful academic environment (Pajalic et al., 2023).

In addition to the language issue, the concept of cultural capital is a key point of contention in the debate. Pherali employs Bourdieu's theory to illustrate that while international academics bring valuable academic capital, their cultural capital may not be fully transferable or appreciated in the new environment. This discrepancy can give rise to feelings of isolation and inadequacy. Alberts (2008) suggests that the concept of 'foreignness' can also be a valuable resource in education. Students have been found to perceive lecturers with personal experiences and perspectives perceived as 'foreign' as more authentic and interesting than local lecturers.

The experience of international academics in Hungary reveals a complex interplay between language acquisition, institutional support, and the challenges of integrating into a new cultural and professional environment. Interviews conducted with international faculty members from two different faculties highlight the diverse approaches to learning Hungarian, the varying levels of institutional assistance, and the impact of language barriers on their daily lives and work. To maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, the specific university faculty from which they hail were refrained.

Participant A: He has been in Hungary for less than five years preferred to be interviewed in Hungarian. He teaches in Faculty A.

Participant B: The other interviewee has worked at the university for over five years. She has not studied Hungarian before, unlike Participant A, an interviewee. She teaches in Faculty A.

Participant C: He has been in Hungary for less than five years and preferred to be interviewed in English. He teaches in Faculty B.

Participant D: He has been in Hungary for over five years and preferred to be interviewed in Hungarian. He teaches in Faculty B.

The interviews revealed that international academics at the University of Debrecen employ both formal and informal methods to learn Hungarian. For example, Participant A, who had been in Hungary

for less than five years, had attended summer universities where he studied Hungarian and took private lessons with the support of his supervisor. He found general communication in Hungarian more challenging than academic communication despite being assessed at a B2 level by his language teacher. Participant B from the same faculty also confirmed that, although her boss expected her to learn Hungarian, she received encouragement from their supervisors and even had access to paid language courses. Her experience highlights the positive impact of institutional support on language acquisition and integration (Pajalic et al., 2023).

In contrast, Participant D, who has lived in Hungary for more than five years, did not receive any formal language training and instead "absorbed" the language through daily interactions. Although he has become proficient enough to conduct the interview in Hungarian, he still experiences difficulties, particularly in written communication, and relies on tools like DeepL to overcome these challenges. His knowledge of Hungarian is so good that he can spot mistakes in translation programs. Similarly, Participant C did not receive a Hungarian language course.

Language barriers were a common theme across the interviews, particularly in oral communication and informal settings. For example, Participant A expressed difficulty in everyday conversations, preferring to switch to English when needed. On the other hand, Participant B found that learning Hungarian significantly improved her ability to engage in informal meetings and social interactions with colleagues, which were often conducted in Hungarian.

Misunderstandings due to language differences were also reported, with some interviewees feeling frustrated when their mistakes in Hungarian were not corrected or when cultural nuances in language were not fully understood. These challenges were particularly pronounced in informal settings, where the lack of proficiency in Hungarian could hinder social integration and relationship-building.

Many interviewees relied on translation tools like DeepL and Google Translator to cope with these challenges. While these tools were helpful for basic communication, their limitations in accurately conveying complex academic content were acknowledged. Participant C also employed strategies to focus on keywords in conversations or switch to English to ensure clarity.

Despite the challenges, the ability to speak Hungarian was seen as a valuable asset for integration into the local culture and enhancing professional interactions. For instance, Participant B's efforts to learn Hungarian improved her

communication with colleagues and helped her build rapport with her students by using Hungarian examples in her teaching.

However, the necessity of learning Hungarian varied across different faculties. In the cases of Participant C and Participant D, Hungarian was not required for professional tasks, as English was the primary language used in teaching and research. Nonetheless, the desire to improve Hungarian skills was expressed, particularly to facilitate better communication with non-English-speaking staff

## CONCLUSIONS

Language barriers have been and continue to be a major challenge in the university environment, affecting teaching, research, and professional relations. Although these barriers can be mitigated through targeted support and training, they remain barriers for both non-native English speakers and foreigners who do not speak the local language. The research conducted at the University of Debrecen has provided valuable insights into the complex dynamics of language barriers in a multinational academic environment. Using a mixed-methods approach that included both surveys and in-depth interviews, the study effectively captured the perspectives of local and international academics. The findings of this study highlight the need for academic institutions to recognize and proactively address these challenges to ensure that language skills do not become a barrier to academic success or professional development. The results show that there is a lack of consistency in language training for both local and international colleagues. Local colleagues need more specific training from native-speaking teachers. In particular, they need to focus on accents. And foreign colleagues need more affordable Hungarian language courses that help them integrate and get to know the culture better. As higher education continues to globalize, fostering an inclusive environment that supports linguistic diversity will be vital in enhancing the internationalization and competitiveness of universities.

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**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1.  
**Respondents of the questionnaire**

<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Native language</b>	<b>Academic level</b>	<b>Academic years</b>
<b>Agriculture1</b>	Male	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	15
<b>Econ1</b>	Female	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	4
<b>Econ2</b>	Female	Hungarian	PhD Student	1
<b>Econ3</b>	Female	Hungarian	PhD Student	1
<b>Econ4</b>	Female	Hungarian	PhD Student	19
<b>Econ5</b>	Male	Hungarian	Associate Professor	1
<b>Econ6</b>	n/a	Hungarian	PhD Student	18
<b>Econ7</b>	Female	Hungarian	PhD Student	16
<b>Econ8</b>	Female	Hungarian	Associate Professor	24
<b>Econ9</b>	Female	Hungarian	Visiting Lecturer	5
<b>Econ10</b>	Female	Hungarian	Associate Professor	4
<b>Econ11</b>	Female	Hungarian	Assistant Lecturer	4
<b>Econ12</b>	Female	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	30
<b>Econ13</b>	Male	Hungarian	Assistant Lecturer	2
<b>Econ14</b>	Female	Hungarian	PhD Student	2
<b>Econ15</b>	Female	Hungarian	Associate Professor	2
<b>Econ16</b>	Female	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	5
<b>Econ17</b>	Female	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	1
<b>Econ18</b>	Female	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	20
<b>Econ19</b>	Female	Hungarian	Assistant Lecturer	18
<b>Econ20</b>	Female	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	24
<b>Econ21</b>	Female	Hungarian	n/a	4
<b>Econ22</b>	Male	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	16
<b>Health1</b>	Female	Hungarian	Assistant Lecturer	6
<b>Humanities1</b>	Female	Hungarian	Assistant Lecturer	9
<b>Humanities2</b>	Female	Hungarian	Assistant Lecturer	2
<b>Informatics1</b>	Female	Hungarian	Associate Professor	20
<b>Law1</b>	Male	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	6
<b>N/A</b>	Female	Hungarian	Managing Expert	15
<b>Pharm1</b>	Female	Hungarian	Senior Lecturer	11
<b>Science1</b>	Female	Hungarian	Managing Expert	20

Source: author's compilation