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English Self-Confidence and Classroom Engagement Among International University Students in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Australia has become a popular destination for international students to pursue higher education. As Australia is an English-speaking country, international students must complete an English proficiency test prior to commencing their studies at university. Lacking confidence in English has been identified as a barrier to international students' engagement in the classroom. This study investigated self-confidence in English skills differs between first year international and domestic students, and whether it predicts student engagement. A total of 66 participants (international = 34, domestic = 32) completed an online questionnaire collecting quantitative data. Results found that international students had significantly lower self-confidence in English skills than domestic students. Furthermore, this study found that self-confidence in speaking English was an overall significant predictor of student engagement which may discourage active engagement in the classroom. Therefore, it is important to explore this relationship further to provide strategies to improve international students' confidence and engagement.

Keywords: language proficiency, higher education, international students, self-confidence, student engagement, survey

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INTRODUCTION

International students often pursue higher education abroad; one such university destination is Australia (Grimm, 2019), where they consider safety, quality of education, entry requirements, and the environment of the preferred destination when deciding (McLeay et al., 2020). After graduation from an Australian university, international students can apply for post-study visas to seek employment, leading to permanent residency which is an added incentive as it leads to eventual citizenship (Grimm, 2019; Tran et al., 2020). As of January 2024, Australia reported 582,636 enrolments by international students (with temporary student visas), which is the highest record for enrolments to date (Australian Government, 2024a). Nearly 45% of international students coming to Australia comprise students from three countries: China (20%), India (17%), and Nepal (8%) (Australian Government, 2024a). Most international students arriving in Australia speak at least a minimum of two languages, their native language and English, and sometimes even more languages. However, as Australia is an English-speaking country where education is taught primarily in English, this can be a language barrier for international students. In addition to this, international students often face difficulties adjusting to Australian culture and the university environment. Many report that navigating new academic expectations, social norms, and lifestyle changes during their first year is particularly disorienting (Belford, 2017; Usman et al., 2026). This is a concern when academic success in the first semester of study predicts future study success (Brouwer et al., 2016) and when successful academic integration lowers attrition rates during the first year of higher education (Ishitani, 2016).

To successfully integrate themselves in the Australian academic space, the first challenge international students must tackle is communication in English. Entry requirements for international students to commence higher education requires completion of a recognized English proficiency test, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and must demonstrate minimum levels of proficiency before undertaking Australian courses (Australian Government, 2024b; Tran et al., 2020). These English proficiency tests assess four components: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. IELTS also conducts two versions of the tests assessing these components, IELTS Academic and IELTS General; the former measures English skills specifically required for higher education settings while the latter measures English skills for everyday contexts such as work and social life (Hashemi & Daneshfar, 2018). These English proficiency tests mirror study tasks that international students will have to complete during higher education, such as written assignments, group discussions and oral presentations. International students need to therefore meet the standards in these tests before they can commence their studies at Australian universities (Australian Government, 2024b; Tran et al., 2020).

It is important to note that despite meeting the proficiency test requirements, international students often fear communication in English. A wealth of resources is available to international students to pass these proficiency tests, from preparation modules to structured lessons (Hashemi & Daneshfar, 2018). While these tests assess necessary skills for university assignments, they don't account for unstructured class discussions, collaborative learning with peers, and communication with teaching staff. International students attempt to overcome these challenges, however, anxiety over language communication might influence their confidence and engagement with domestic students (Halali et al., 2023; Telbis et al., 2014). Language anxiety refers to individuals who are anxious regarding communication of a foreign language; sharing usual anxiety symptoms like feelings of tenseness, worry, and nervousness which affects how deeply they engage in the classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986). When applying Self-Efficacy Theory to this context, which suggests an individual's judgement of whether one is capable of successfully accomplishing certain tasks and achieving desired outcomes affects their performance (Bandura, 1978), we can understand how high emotional arousal surrounding competency in communicating in English might affect their proficiency.

Through the outcome-response model regarding self-efficacy, we can explore the relationship

between overall self-confidence and engagement. Self-Efficacy Theory states outcomes expectations, the strength of their conviction that one can successfully execute the behaviour required to produce the outcomes, directly determines how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist against aversive experiences (Bandura, 1978). Applying this framework, we can assume that individuals with positive appraisal or higher self-confidence in their English skills, may expend more effort to communicate. However, individuals with negative appraisal or lower self- confidence in language communication may hinder their own ability to engage in the classroom, impeding their learning. First-year undergraduate students also experience an adjustment period from high school to university that can be daunting (Belford, 2017; Usman et al., 2026), and the additional language anxiety, amongst other stressors that international students face, can affect how well they handle challenging academic situations. But with goal-setting and appropriate support, students can be motivated to adapt and change their perceived confidence, which directly improves their engagement (Arshad et. al., 2026; Usman et al., 2026).

Student engagement comprises multiple dimensions that allow students to be involved in higher education. This can include participating in class, communicating with teachers and peers, taking initiative with assignments, and volunteering as part of clubs and organizations (Crabtree, 2023; Frymier & Houser, 2015; Koca & Karadağ, 2025; Zhoc et al., 2019). Students with higher levels of engagement, demonstrated through class discussions and collaborative learning, showed increased academic success (Koca & Karadağ, 2025). Learning in higher education requires oral participation in classroom discussions and in some individual and group assessments. Social engagement, whether in clubs or other activities with peers, is also part of the university experience. Therefore, communication is key for student engagement both in the classroom and in social environments. However, when international students are affected negatively by language proficiency and feel apprehensive about speaking, integrating socially at university becomes a significant challenge (Rahim, 2025; Telbis et al., 2014; Xiao, 2021). Both domestic students and teaching staff reported observing low levels of participation and engagement from international students, despite international students themselves contrastingly reporting high participation and engagement (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). Nonetheless, improved language proficiency guides social interactions with domestic students, allowing for increased social and cultural integration into the host country and reducing uncertainty among international students and improves academic outcomes (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

International students lack self-confidence in communicating in English, hindering their engagement in the classroom (Telbis et al., 2014; Xiao, 2021). Self-confidence refers to one's belief and judgement in their own skills, this can be internal (e.g., self-knowledge, positive thoughts, etc.) and external (behaviours towards others) (Aziz & Asih, 2023; Ibrahim & Jaafar, 2017). In addition to moving countries, the transition from high school to university is quite difficult for first-year students (Belford, 2017; Usman et al., 2026), with undergraduate students reported to have lower engagement in higher education than postgraduate students (Darmody et al., 2022). Improving English language skills and attending social activities to increase engagement with their domestic peers are the two most common reasons given to improve their university experience (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). Thus, international students understand their own shortcomings and are eager to improve their English proficiency (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Crabtree, 2023; MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). However, feelings of fear and anxiety leading to a lack of confidence in communicating in English often prevent international students from engaging in class altogether (Halali et al., 2023; Rahim, 2025). Conversely, international students who reported higher confidence in English reported high levels of confidence in completing their degrees, in contrast, international students who reported lower confidence in English reported low levels of confidence in completing their degrees (Telbis et al., 2014). Students who struggle with confidence have increased anxiety regarding communicating in English and further will face obstacles when engaging both inside (seeking support, collaborating with others) and outside of the classroom maintaining friendships and integrating into the wider culture (Aziz & Asih, 2023; Brouwer et al., 2016; Denies et al., 2015). These different types of engagement are necessary for students to succeed at higher education institutions (Muthuswamy & G, 2023). To cope, these students rely on each other, both those who speak their common language and

international students from other backgrounds, for support and guidance rather than domestic students or teaching staff (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). In the social context, international students who are unsuccessful in adjusting to the host country subsequently experience poorer academic performance, further affecting their language confidence (Muthuswamy & G, 2023), but research shows that having strong social support can mitigate this source of stress, thus boosting their self-confidence (Arshad et al., 2026; Kim & Lee, 2025; Usman et. al., 2026).

Understanding that language proficiency hinders international students' confidence to communicate in the classroom could help implement methods to increase engagement from this cohort. International students also rely on each other for support and guidance as the delivery of spoken English impacts their engagement in the class; whether this is their own accent when speaking in English, or the native English speaker's accent and their delivery speed, both prevented international students from engaging in class with peers and teachers (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017; Xiao, 2021). However, this hinderance in engagement could be mitigated by changing class sizes as smaller class sizes improve student engagement (Crabtree, 2023), and students, as well as teachers, have shown a preference towards smaller class sizes than larger class sizes (Khajavy et al., 2016) showing this to be preferred and necessary change to raise engagement. Additionally, international students reported that their study experience would be improved by patience and understanding from domestic students and teachers when trying to communicate (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). What this means at the classroom level, that not only are international students benefiting from support by the institution but also support from both peers and teachers that facilitates integration into the new environment and promotes academic success (Brouwer et al., 2016; Merola et al., 2019). Thus, universities must provide a conducive classroom environment and access to resources that encourage international students to engage with their domestic peers and vice versa (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Rienties et al., 2012; Usman et. al., 2026).

Study Rationale

As established, a significant proportion of international students who arrive in Australia intend to secure employment after their studies, a necessary skill required to gain meaningful employment is proficiency in English (Australian Government, 2024b; Tran et al., 2020). When migrating into a host country where English is the primary language, it is important that educational institutions aid international students in communicating with domestic students/teachers to integrate them into the host country's culture and ultimately prepare them to enter the workforce (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Postgraduate international students, while it may be their first-year in an unfamiliar country, have the advantage of previously having completed a degree in their home country, thus able to handle the expectations of higher education. In comparison, first-year undergraduate international students must both tackle an unfamiliar academic environment as well as an unfamiliar social environment. Previous research has shown that transitioning from high school to university can be onerous for undergraduate first-year students (Belford, 2017; Usman et al., 2026), they are at risk of dropping out if not successful in their studies (Ishitani, 2016) and show lower engagement than postgraduate students (Darmody et al., 2022). The factor affecting their engagement could be their self-confidence in their English abilities (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Crabtree, 2023; MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). Thus, studying this relationship between English language confidence and student engagement could help better understand obstacles faced specifically by undergraduate first-yar international students when transitioning into higher education in an Australian context. This could provide higher education institutions valuable insight in how to smoothen the transition into university for international students.

Aims and Hypotheses

Aim 1: To investigate the differences in self-confidence in English skills in a classroom setting between first year domestic and international students studying at Monash University.

Hypothesis 1: This study hypothesizes that there will be a difference in self-confidence in English skills scores (as measured by the ESCS) between first year domestic Australian students and international students. It is hypothesized that domestic students will have higher self-confidence in English skills than international students.

Aim 2: To investigate whether self-confidence in English skills predicts student engagement in a classroom setting in students studying at Monash University.

Hypothesis 2: This study hypothesizes that ESCS scores will predict HESES scores in first year students. Students with lower self-confidence in English skills (as measured in the ESCS) would be less likely to engage (as measured in the HESES) in a classroom setting.

RESEARCH METHOD

Study Design

This study used the online questionnaire platform, Qualtrics, to collect quantitative data regarding demographics, scale measurements regarding self-confidence in English skills and student engagement. This study collected primary data consisting of self-report questionnaires.

Participants

A total of 66 participants completed the online questionnaire. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 (M = 18.94, SD = 1.35). The sample included 50 (76%) participants identified as female, 12 (18%) participants identified as male, 3 (5%) participants identified as non-binary/gender diverse, and 1 (1%) participant preferred not to say. Among the participants, 34 (52%) were international students, and 32 (48%) were domestic students. Participants were eligible if they were first-year, undergraduate students, both domestic and international, at Monash University enrolled in any course and had completed one semester of study. Exclusion criteria included students in the second year and above and who were under 18 years of age. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling; this was done online via posts on first-year unit Moodle forums, social media and physically through survey flyers posted on on-campus message boards. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants who wished to be considered for the random prize draw were linked to a separate Google Form which asked participants for the Monash University student email address. Ethics approval was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 42526).

Measures

English Self-Confidence Scale (ESCS)

ESCS is a 12-item scale measuring self-confidence in English skills where participants judge their own abilities in reading, writing, speaking, and understanding English (Aziz & Asih, 2023). An example statement of the ESCS is ‘I know enough English to be able to write comfortably’. The statements are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) and. The scores range from 12-60. Higher mean scores indicate higher levels of self-confidence in English. Item correlations between the scale items, with all but one item, reported significantly strong validity as a measure of self-confidence in English language skills in Pakistani students and reported high internal reliability (α = .94) (Aziz & Asih, 2023). Similarly, Clément et al. (2003) reported Cronbach’s alpha (α = .92 to .96) on learned language confidence.

Higher Education Student Engagement Scale (HESES)

HESES is a 28-item scale that measures student engagement in university students. There are five

dimensions and two sub-dimensions of engagement: (i) Academic (includes sub-domain of Online Engagement), (ii) Cognitive, (iii) Social Engagement with Peers (includes sub-domain of Beyond-Class Engagement), (iv) Social Engagement with Teachers, (v) Affective. An example statement of the HESES is 'I regularly study with other students', and these statements are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items are summed to obtain the HESES score which ranges from 28-140. Higher scores indicate higher levels of engagement. HESES reported high criterion validity, and correlations between all five domains showed internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficients (α = .70 to .87) (Zhoc et al., 2019). Supporting this, HESES has high internal reliability (α = .97) (Kim et al., 2024) and maintains high reliability (α = .87) in different language contexts (Marcionetti & Zammitti, 2023).

Procedure

Data for this study was collected via Qualtrics, an online questionnaire platform. Before agreeing to take part in the study, participants were provided an explanatory statement, a summarized version was available on the landing page of the questionnaire as well as the complete statement via the link on the landing page. They were informed about the aims of the study, how their data would be handled, and that participation was voluntary. This online questionnaire included questions about demographic characteristics, self-report scale for self-confidence in English skills (measured by ESCS), and a scale for student engagement (measured by HESES), taking roughly 35-40 minutes to complete.

After providing consent, demographic characteristics were collected which included age, gender, ethnicity/cultural background, and course name. If participants indicated that they were international students, Qualtrics displayed additional questions. These additional questions asked international students if English was their first language and if not, what language they spoke, if they attended an English-medium school, and if not, they were asked to indicate what language-medium (e.g., Tamil-medium, Chinese-medium, etc.) they attended and finally what English proficiency test they completed and their total score on the test.

All participants who completed the questionnaire in full were asked if they wished to be considered for a random prize draw from which 15 participants would receive a $50 e-gift voucher. Monash University student email addresses were collected for the random prize draw through a separate Google Form linked to the online questionnaire made only available once all answers were completed.

Data Analysis and Assumptions Outcome

Using G*Power (Version 3.1.9.6), a priori power analysis was conducted to estimate an appropriate sample size for this study (Faul et al., 2007). The parameters were based on a power of 80%, a large effect size (d = .8), and a significance level of α = .05. It was calculated that a total sample size of 42 participants (with 21 participants per group) be recruited for the independent samples t-test. Therefore, the subsequent sample size of 66 was considered appropriate for this study. Data analysis was conducted by using *Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program* (JASP Version 0.19.0) (JASP Team, 2024). Descriptive statistics of both sample demographics were calculated. An alpha level of .05 was used to interpret statistical significance for all data analyses.

To investigate Hypothesis 1, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the difference in self-confidence in English skills scores (as measured by the ESCS) between domestic and international students. For the independent samples t-test, there was no violation of homogeneity of variances (ESCS: p = .302,) was significant on Levene's test. However, normality was violated for ESCS as the visual inspection of histograms and Q-Q plots showed a non-normal distribution. To numerically confirm this, a Shapiro-Wilk's test was conducted for ESCS (International: W = .87, p < .001, Domestic: W = .73, p < .001), thus confirming that normality was violated for ESCS. Therefore, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U-Test was utilised for analysis. Additionally, initial visual inspections of box plots showed that there were outliers for ESCS. However, as a non-parametric test was used, which is more robust and

able to deal with outliers, thus outliers were not removed.

For Hypothesis 2, a linear regression analysis was conducted to investigate whether self-confidence in English skills predicts student engagement in a classroom setting in both domestic and international students. For linear regression analysis, the normality and linearity of residuals were assessed by visually inspecting the standardised residuals Q-Q plot; this assumption was not violated. However, the Residuals vs Predicted plot used to check for homoscedasticity showed some unequal variances.

RESULTS

A Mann-Whitney U-Test was conducted as the non-parametric equivalent to the independent samples *t*-test. The Mann-Whitney U-Test was used to compare the differences in self-confidence in English skills scores (as measured by the ESCS) between domestic and international students **(Hypothesis 1).** Then, a linear regression analysis was conducted to investigate whether self-confidence in English skills predicts student engagement in a classroom setting in students **(Hypothesis 2).**

Descriptive Statistics

Eligible participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 (M = 18.94, SD = 1.35). This included 50 (76%) participants identified as female, 12 (18%) participants identified as male, 3 (5%) participants identified as non-binary/gender diverse, and 1 (1%) participant preferred not to say. Among the participants, 34 (52%) were international students, and 32 (48%) were domestic students. Descriptive statistics of participant ethnicities between domestic and international students are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Participant Ethnicities

	International (n = 34)	Domestic (n = 32)
Ethnicity, *n* (%)		
East Asian	14 (41.18)	5 (15.63)
Southeast Asian	13 (38.23)	2 (6.25)
South Asian	7 (20.59)	10 (31.25)
Anglophone* European	0 (0)	8 (25)
Non-Anglophone** European	0 (0)	2 (6.25)
African	0 (0)	2 (6.25)
Australian	0 (0)	2 (6.25)
Middle-Eastern	0 (0)	1 (3.12)

Note. *Anglophone = English speaking background, **Non-Anglophone = Non-English speaking background

International Students Statistics about Language

Among the 34 international students, 29 (85%) answered that English was not their first language and 5 (15%) answered that English was their first language. Statistics of languages spoken by the 29 participants who indicated that English was not their first language are reported in Table 3.

Table 3
Frequencies of Languages Spoken by International Students

Languages	*n*	%
Cantonese	6	20.69
Khmer	6	20.69
Mandarin	4	13.79
Hindi	3	10.35
Gujarati	2	6.89
Vietnamese	2	6.89
Japanese	1	3.45
Korean	1	3.45
Malay	1	3.45
Indo	1	3.45
Burmese	1	3.45
Thai	1	3.45

Note. $N = 29$

Among the 34 international students, 30 (88%) attended an English-medium school and 4 (12%) did not attend an English-medium school. Statistics of what English proficiency tests completed by the 34 international students are reported in Table 4.

Table 4
Frequencies of English Proficiency Tests Completed by International Students

Proficiency Tests	*n*	%
IELTS	22	64.71
Pearson	2	5.88
Multiple*	3	8.82
Not required	7	20.59

Note. $N = 34$

* This category includes students who mentioned completing multiple proficiency tests including IELTS, Pearson, TOEFL, Cambridge KET/PET, and TOEIC.

Self-Confidence in English Skills (ESCS) – Mann-Whitney U-Test

To compare the differences between international and domestic students in their self-confidence skills in English scores (as measured by ESCS), a Mann-Whitney U-Test was conducted, and the rank-biserial correlation (r_B) was calculated. 34 international students ($M = 50.21$, $Mdn = 52.50$, $SD = 6.75$) were compared to the 32 domestic students ($M = 53.06$, $Mdn = 55.50$, $SD = 5.90$) on their self-confidence scores. The Mann-Whitney U-Test showed that this difference was statistically significant, $U = 348$, $p = .012$. As measured by rank-biserial correlation (r_B), the effect size was $r_B = -0.36$, indicating a medium effect (Goss-Sampson, 2024). As predicted by Hypothesis 1, there was a directional difference in self-confidence in English scores between international and domestic students which was statistically significant. International students had lower self-confidence in English skills than domestic students.

Student Engagement (HESES) – Mann-Whitney U-Test

To compare the differences between domestic and international students in their student engagement scores (as measured by HESES), a Mann-Whitney U-Test was conducted, and the rank-biserial correlation (r_B) was calculated. 34 international students (M = 100.88, Mdn = 102, SD = 12.50) were compared to the 32 domestic students (M = 98.28, Mdn = 101.50, SD = 12.36) on their student engagement scores (see Figure D2). The Mann-Whitney U-Test showed that this difference was not statistically significant, U = 607.50, p = .419. As measured by rank-biserial correlation (r_B), the effect size was r_B = 0.12, indicating a small effect (Goss-Sampson, 2024). While there was a directional difference, as predicted by Hypothesis 1.2, this difference in student engagement scores between international and domestic students was statistically non-significant. International students were found to engage more in the classroom than domestic students.

Linear Regression of Self-Confidence in English Skills and Student Engagement

A linear regression was conducted with self-confidence in English skills (as measured by the ESCS) as the predictor variable and student engagement (as measured by the HESES) as the outcome variable. This was used to test whether self-confidence in English skills predicts student engagement. A significant predictive model was found, R^2 = .10, F(1, 64) = 7.29, p = .009. The regression model accounts for 10% of the variance in student engagement which is explained by self-confidence in English skills. The regression coefficient (b = 0.614) shows that student engagement can be predicted using the following regression equation:

Student Engagement = 67.96 + (0.614 * Self-confidence in English skills)

The linear regression showed that self-confidence in English skills was a significant predictor of student engagement in the classroom, accounting for a small amount of variance, in students.

DISCUSSION

First-year undergraduate international and domestic students from Monash University were compared to investigate the differences in their self-confidence in English skills in the classroom. It was hypothesized that there would be a difference in self-confidence in English skill scores (Hypothesis 1) between international and domestic students, with domestic students reporting higher in comparison to international students. Supporting Hypothesis 1, we found that domestic students have significantly higher self-confidence in their English skills compared to international students. We also aimed to investigate whether self-confidence in English skills predicts student engagement in first-year undergraduate students. It was hypothesized that self-confidence in English skills would predict student engagement for first-year undergraduate students (Hypothesis 2) and that students with lower self-confidence in English skills would be less likely to engage in the classroom. Supporting the hypothesis, we found that self-confidence in English skills is a significant predictor of student engagement in first year international students.

As stated above, the findings clearly show that international students have lower self-confidence in English skills than their domestic counterparts. These negative self-judgements of their skills seem to contradict their recorded proficiency in English as they already met the minimum requirements needed for university. This supports findings where international students raised that language proficiency was one of the main challenges in higher education (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Crabtree, 2023) and state that lack of English skills is the reason for lowered engagement (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). Pertaining to the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1978), international students' perceived opinion on their communication affects their engagement in class. This is possibly due to their language anxiety regarding oral discussion and Australian classroom culture which might affect their proficiency.

As per Hypothesis 2, it is evident that self-confidence in English skills predicts student engagement, and first year international students reporting lower levels of self-confidence in English skills, indicating that first year international students struggle with engagement due in part to their self-confidence in English

skills. These findings add to the existing literature as students who have higher self-confidence in English skills also engage more in the classroom, thus they are more comfortable in stating their ideas and opinions and actively participate in group discussions (Denies et al., 2015; Khajavy et al., 2016; Telbis et al., 2014; Xiao, 2021). As opposed to students who struggled with expressing their thoughts and ideas confidently, thus, they would not engage (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017), international students fear being judged negatively by peers, which has significantly reduced their likelihood of speaking in English (Kalsoom et al., 2020). For example, Saudi and Chinese students tend to rely on memorization techniques and are conditioned to teacher-focused learning, where knowledge is sought from the authority figure, as opposed to individual learning methods typically utilized in Australian universities (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Xiao, 2021). Additionally, international students from collectivist cultures find it difficult to engage during open discussions, often feeling hesitant to speak up (Hassan, 2025). This shows that the difficulties international students face English are commonly an output issue as opposed to an input issue.

Expanding on this output issue, an explanation found in research is that anxiety about speaking English around their domestic peers prevented international students from engaging in the classroom (Kalsoom et al., 2020; Manipuspika, 2018; Rahim, 2025). International students want to engage more with domestic students and teachers in the classroom, however, their ability to communicate with native English speakers is directly influenced by having confidence in their English skills, thus, self-confidence is a vital aspect of communication (Lin, 2019). Self-confidence in one's skills influences how students engage with their learning environment (Ibrahim & Jaafar, 2017) and students who have higher levels of communication anxiety are less likely to participate orally in the classroom (Frymier & Houser, 2016). Research has shown that international students who are proficient in English, reported higher connectedness with domestic students, which improved their psychological well-being and allowed for successful academic and social integration (Bethel et al., 2020). Therefore, international students need to be convinced that while they fear making mistakes in the classroom when speaking, without engagement and participation, they cannot improve their language skills (Denies et al., 2015).

However, self-confidence in English skills and its effects on engagement is not an isolated relationship. The interactions between students influence engagement, where international students perceive hostility in the classroom, they are less likely to communicate in English due to anxiety around speaking (Kalsoom et al., 2020; Khajavy et al., 2016). Additionally, large group sizes may be affecting engagement in this cohort. In smaller groups, students feel more at ease to communicate as opposed to larger groups, thus engaging in class discussions at the group level is preferred over a discussion with the whole class (Crabtree, 2023; Khajavy et al., 2016). In contrast, students are more likely to communicate in English in the classroom when supported by their peers and teachers (Kalsoom et al., 2020). Advice and guidance from teachers are sought out by students, thus support from teaching staff would encourage international students to be more confident in speaking English in the classroom and consequently increase their engagement (Kalsoom et al., 2020; MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). Additionally, support from peers and teaching staff also significantly improved academic success during the first semester, and this predicted academic success in later semesters (Brouwer et al., 2016). Social engagement behaviours such as requesting help and student collaboration improved study success (Brouwer et al., 2016), however, we know that a lack of self-confidence in English skills prevents international students from actively participating in these behaviours. Furthermore, increased proficiency in the host country language in international students is a significant predictor of decreased stress concerning integration with the culture of the host country, thus allowing for interactions with domestic students (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Arshad et. al., 2026; Kim & Lee, 2025, Usman, et. al., 2026). International students who are more proficient in English were significantly more confident in identifying behaviours and beliefs in domestic students allowing for successful communication between the two student groups (Rui & Wang, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

International students are aware that one of the reasons they struggle with engaging in the classroom is their lack of self-confidence in their English skills (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). While being proficient in English is required, having an awareness of the educational setting in university could help international students transition smoothly into higher education (Alsahafi and Shin, 2017; Usman, et al., 2026). This could be through orientation programs that outline learning and teaching approaches in Australia, as well as provide assistance with communication in English. As highlighted in existing research, international students must navigate a complicated balance in norms between their home country and Australia, wherein their concern around language, academics, and belonging (Arthur, 2016; Usman, et. al., 2026). Apart from programs and resources with accessible information, it is critical to provide culturally sensitive forms of support as an educational institution. Seeking help and views around mental health differ from culture to culture, thus designing a variety of resources; counseling services, psychoeducation, and group interventions is needed (Arthur, 2017). However, it must be ensured these resources are prepared with multicultural backgrounds in mind. Some international students may find it difficult to communicate with a stranger, especially that of one in an authority role, thus it is important to ensure that educators and faculty members are also prepared to handle international students' concerns in and out of class.

Since communication and oral participation are vital for engagement in the classroom, support from both peers and teaching staff would promote social and academic integration which will increase engagement in international students (Brouwer et al., 2016; Merola et al., 2019). Students have noted that English-language instruction impacts international students' classroom engagement (Xiao, 2021). Therefore, increasing the patience and understanding of domestic peers and teaching staff when international students are communicating could improve their study experience and engagement (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017).

Another future implication could be implementing or utilising existing programs to make the transition from high school to university easier, as international students who participated in orientation programs provided by the university reported higher confidence in classroom engagement (Hassan, 2025). These programs could be co-designed and guided by international students for incoming international students, that way students with similar backgrounds can impart support and advice on the expectations around engagement in university (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Rienties et al., 2012).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTUE DIRECTIONS

A few limitations were identified in our study. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small, indicated by the non-normal distribution of the score of ESCS and HESES between international and domestic students. In addition to this, the sample was obtained using convenience sampling which consisted of students from a single institution. Secondly, the scales for self-confidence in English skills and student engagement relied on self-report measures. Data collected through this method would be subject to recall bias and inconsistency. Students may misremember and conflate their actual emotions and performance when completing the online questionnaire. Additionally, international students have shown to self-blame and be highly critical of their own skills (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017). Therefore, further research should consider involving teaching staff who observe students in the classroom. For example, when considering how larger class sizes impact engagement in students (Crabtree, 2023), students as well as teaching staff have shown a preference towards smaller group discussions (Khajavy et al., 2016). This will allow for a more nuanced comparison of engagement between international and domestic students and provide a complete picture of the classroom setting.

Thirdly, in terms of diversity within international students, this study groups all international students as one homogeneous group for the sake of analysis, reducing the generalizability of the findings to other groups of international students. Further research should consider implementing an intersectional

approach when investigating issues concerning international students as their backgrounds are diverse (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Brunsting et al., 2024). Facets of their identity such as ethnicity, first language, culture and beliefs inform and influence the way international students navigate their environment (Hassan, 2025; Xiao, 2021). Perhaps this could be established by expanding the sample of students by investigating multiple Australian universities, and a larger sample of students will allow us to investigate differences between specific ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese students, Indian students, etc.).

The final suggestion is the use of qualitative data. While ESCS and HESES are valid scales, they cannot entirely capture what international students face in their day-to-day life. To support the quantitative findings, future research should consider using focus groups or interviews to gain first-hand experiences of international students. Using valuable insights into the lived experiences of international students and their direct input can help inform programs and changes that might be necessary to help their transition into higher education (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Lobo & Gurney, 2014; MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2017).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study found that international first year students reported significantly lower self-confidence in English skills compared to domestic first year students. In support of previous research, our study also found that higher self-confidence in English skills predicts higher student engagement in first-year undergraduate university students. This is particularly important when considering how higher education institutions can support incoming international students. Future research should consider recruiting a larger sample size of students across multiple Australian universities and integrate qualitative approaches to explore these findings further. This can help find and implement appropriate programs for international students to make their transition into higher education as seamless as possible.

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