



Literacy in Diversity Settings (LiDS):
Integrating international approaches in research and teaching at the
University of Hamburg

March 2026 Prof Carla Bohndick, Dr Sarah McMonagle, Prof Sílvia Melo-Pfeifer

Agenda

- 1 Introduction to the Research Centre LiDS
- 2 Spotlight on two key areas
 - Research on international students
 - Teacher-education programmes

History of LiDS

Years of language-education
research

September 2021
LiDS estd.

Continuing

Numerous interdisciplinary &
international links

Joint Key Question

*How can sustainable language education succeed
in the context of diversity?*

Research Strands

1. Literacy across the life trajectory

- Focus on language education in the context of diversity

2. Literacy, multilingualism and multimodality

- Focus on the conditions for positive development of multilingual and multimodal potential and skills

3. Language learning in subject-specific education

- Focus on language as a prerequisite for learning, a learning resource and a learning objective



Strategic Goals



Support for Early-career researchers

Network and support for early-career researchers



Internationalisation

Development and expansion of international cooperations



Transfer

Mutual exchange between research and practice



Infrastructure

Sustainable research infrastructure

Internationalisation

- 2021-2024: International network, *Next Generation Literacies*
- Since 2025: WERA International Research Network, *Literacy in Multilingual Contexts*
- Associated membership & numerous other collaborations



Spotlight: Research on international students

International students in Germany and the role of language for their sense of belonging

Prof Carla Bohndick & Zhouer Li
Hamburg Centre for University Teaching and Learning



International students in Germany

- Around 400,000 international students enrolled in winter semester 2024/2025 (6% increase from 2023/2024) (DZHW & DAAD, 2025)
- However, German universities experience high dropout rates of international students (49% bachelor students, 26% master students) (Heublein, 2020)
- Here: Focus on student interactions and sense of belonging
- Summaries of three studies with different approaches:
 - Study 1: Systematic review
 - Study 2: Large German dataset on international students in Germany (SeSaBa Study)
 - Study 3: Interviews with Chinese students in Germany

Study 1: systematic review

- What we know:
 - Social interactions, especially those with host national students, influence international students' sense of belonging (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Thies & Falk, 2023)
 - However, international students often struggle to interact with host national students (Heng, 2017; Jean-Francois, 2017)
- Aim:
 - Synthesise evidence on factors influencing international students' social interactions with host nationals
- How:
 - Systematic review, using person-environment fit (P-E fit) as analytical framework

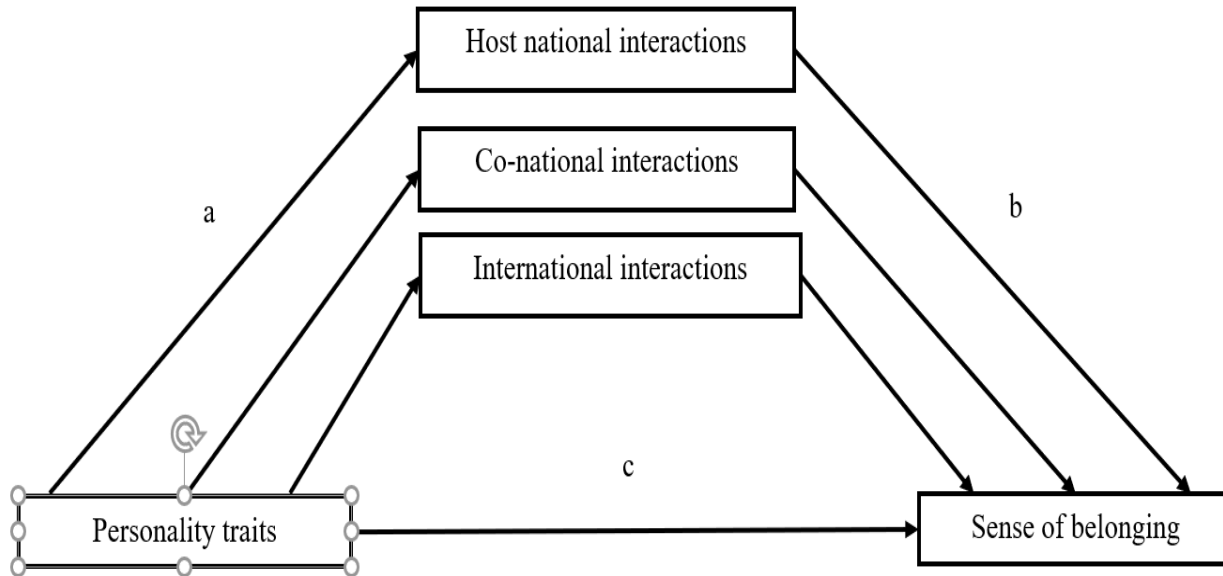
Study 1: systematic review

- Key findings:
 - 3 personal, 6 environmental, and 3 P-E fit factors were identified.
- Role of language in interactions with host nationals:
 - Personal: students' language proficiency shapes confidence and willingness to initiate interactions.
 - Environment: The institutional language environment (e.g., dominant language(s), classroom norms) enables or constrains interaction opportunities.
 - P-E fit: Interaction is smoother when students' language resources match host communication norms (e.g., pace, pragmatics, small talk, academic discourse styles).

Study 2: Large dataset re-analysis (SeSaBa study)

- Background SeSaBa Study:
 - *Success and Withdrawal of International Students in Germany (2017-2021)*
 - Survey of around 4,500 students at 125 German higher-ed institutions
- Here:
 - Personality and Sense of Belonging: The Role of Social Interactions
 - Personality traits: Big Five (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism)
 - Social interactions: contact frequency with host nationals / co-nationals / other internationals
 - Sense of belonging: “How do you feel about your higher education institution?”
 - “I feel a sense of belonging to my higher education”
 - “I’m glad to be at my university”
 - “I see myself as part of my university”

Study 2: Personality and Sense of Belonging: The Role of Social Interactions



Research questions

- 1: Do the Big Five predict sense of belonging directly or indirectly (via social interactions)?
- 2: How do the Big Five predict each interaction type (a-paths)?
- 3: Do effects of interaction types on belonging differ across regional groups (b-paths)?

Figure: Two pathways of association between personality and sense of belonging

Study 2:

Personality and sense of belonging: The role of Social interactions

Key Findings:

- Openness, conscientiousness, extraversion and agreeableness make students feel they belong more at university even without considering social interactions.
- The strongest pathway is interactions with host national students because they are often more “uncertain” and “unpredictable” due to language and cultural rules, so personality is more influential.
- Extraversion is the strongest predictor of interactions with all groups, and it boosts belonging mainly through more interactions with host nationals.
- Co-national and other international interactions show smaller or inconsistent links to belonging.

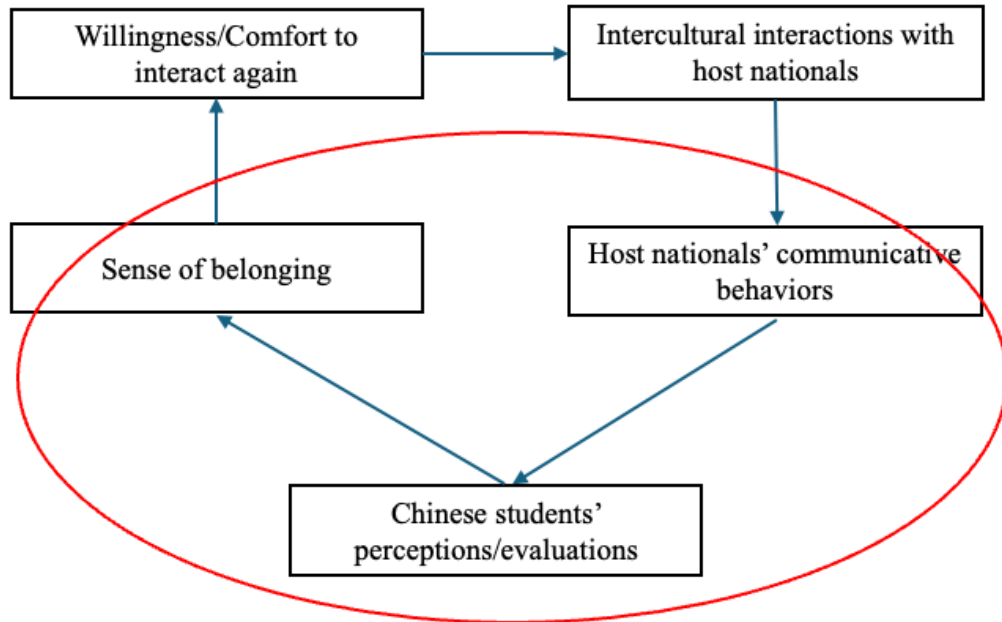
Study 3:

Perceptions of Host Nationals' Communicative Behaviors and Sense of Belonging: The Experiences of Chinese students in Germany

- Focus on Chinese students:
 - Chinese international students constituted the largest group (12.4%) of international students in Germany in 2021 (DZHW, 2022)
- Thematic focus:
 - When communication with host nationals is experienced as meaningful and supportive, international students are more likely to develop strong sense of belonging (Cena et al., 2021)
 - Focus on 'deficits' of international students (Gareis, 2012; Kim, 2012)
 - Call for attention to how international students perceive intercultural communication and how they interpret the communicative behaviors of host nationals as beneficial for their sense of belonging (Bethel et al., 2020; Bilecen, 2024; Wu et al., 2024)



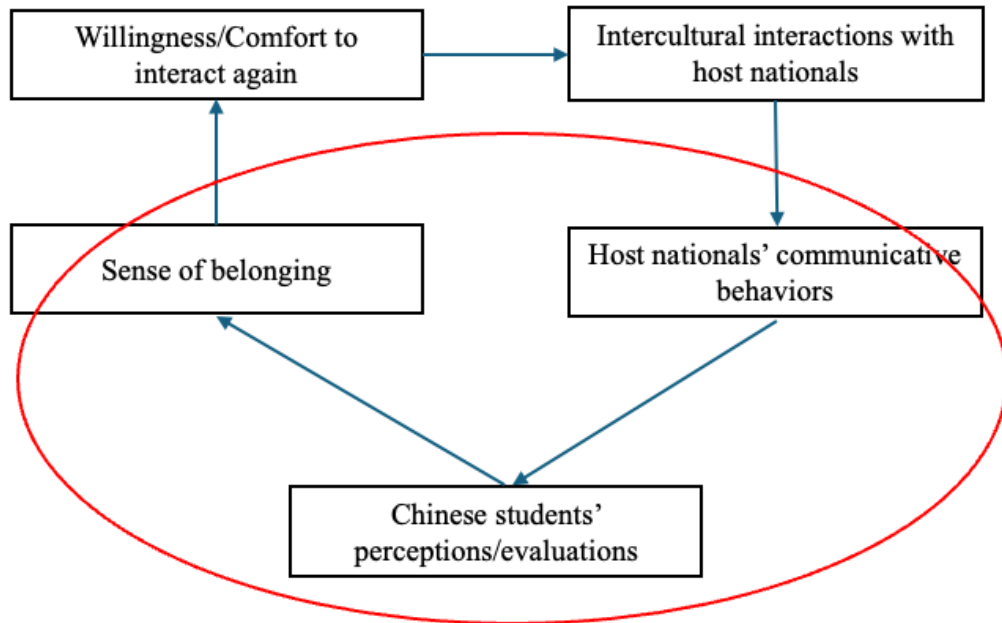
Study 3: Perceptions of Host Nationals' Communicative Behaviors and Sense of Belonging: The Experiences of Chinese Students in Germany



Research questions

- How do Chinese international students perceive host nationals' communicative behaviors in German universities?
- How do perceived host communicative behaviors develop and shape Chinese students' sense of belonging?

Study 3: Perceptions of Host Nationals' Communicative Behaviors and Sense of Belonging: The Experiences of Chinese Students in Germany



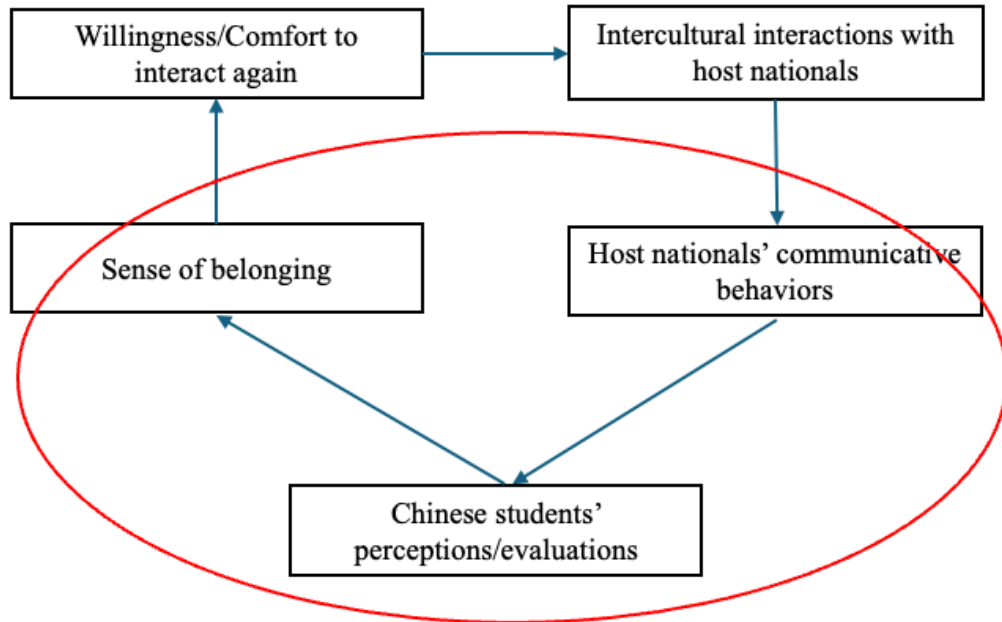
Theoretical framework

- Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

Method

- Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with Chinese students currently enrolled in German universities

Study 3: Perceptions of Host Nationals' Communicative Behaviors and Sense of Belonging: The Experiences of Chinese Students in Germany



Expected contribution

- Shift from deficits to a perception-centered account of how belonging develops through micro-level communicative experiences
- Adds context-specific insight into multilingual, non-English-speaking settings in which language choice can signal inclusion vs. distance, not only comprehension support.

Summary:

Role of language in international students' sense of belonging in Germany

- International students' sense of belonging is shaped through their everyday social interactions, especially those with host national students
- Within these encounters, language functions as a crucial condition across personal, environmental, and person-environment (P-E) fit dimensions
- When international students manage to engage successfully with host national peers, these interactions may contribute more to their sense of belonging than interactions with co-nationals or other international students
- Shifting the focus from international students' "language deficits" to their perceptions of host nationals' communicative behaviours highlights how language use in interaction is interpreted and translated into belonging, which is an important process in multilingual German higher education contexts

Spotlight: Teacher-education programmes

**BOLD – Building on Linguistic and
Cultural Diversity for Social Action
Within and Beyond European
Universities**

Prof Sílvia Melo-Pfeifer



BOLD: “Building on Linguistic and Cultural Diversity for social action within and beyond European universities”

Our partners

<https://boldproject.eu/>

coor
d



Universität
Hamburg
(Germany)

0
1



Universite d'Aix
Marseille (France)

0
2



Web2Learn (Greece)

0
3



Universidade de
Aveiro (Portugal)

0
4



Universidad Autónoma
de Madrid (Spain)

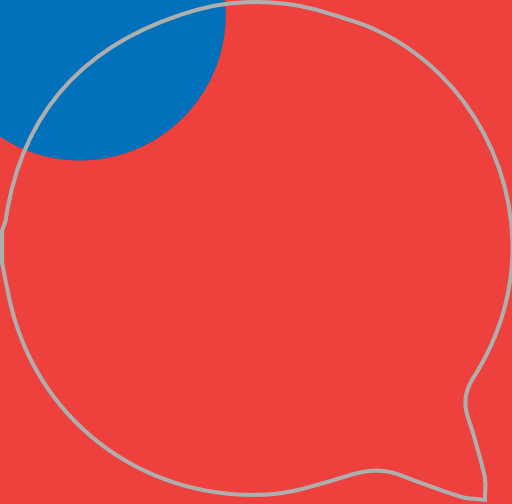
0
5



Rijksuniversiteit
Groningen (The
Netherlands)

BOLD today...

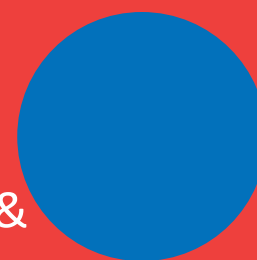
- 0 To explore how involvement in educational processes related to community engagement and service-learning contributes to (language) teachers' professional development in terms of understanding multilingual dynamics in society, in general, and in the classroom, in particular.



**Individuals, namely teachers
and communities, as bottom-up
micro-level language policy actors**

(Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014)

Language activism is an energetic action focused on language use in order to create, influence and change on existing language policies (...) a force for social change which may result in changes in language policy whether official, community or family-based (...) language activism can be quiet, personal and practised in smaller, more intimate settings. (Combs & Penfield, 2012, pp. 462-463)



iversity Settings (LiDS)

Context of data collection: summer school (Aveiro, June 2025)

- Three day summer school with students of partner institutions, who were already developing their SL and SA projects.
- Total of 30 students and 8 tutors/teacher educators from partner institutions.
- Students were supposed to collaboratively conceptualise a project and present it, based on what they perceived as major sociolinguistic issues.



Data collection

- Padlet summer school (July 2025)

The screenshot shows a Padlet board titled "BOLD Summer School" with the following sections:

- Before we get started**: Welcome! We are thrilled to have you at the BOLD Summer School – a gathering of future teachers, teachers, educators, and civil society organisations from across Europe! Over three days, we will explore how SL can empower us to respond to real-world linguistic and cultural challenges in our communities. Through
- Meet the participants**: Let's get to know each other before the Summer School begins! In this space, we invite you to share a short personal presentation that should include:
 - Your **name** and **country**
 - A **photo** of yourself
 - A **brief bio** (max. 60 words)
- Workshop**: Let's get to work! The gears are in motion! In this section, you'll find the **guidelines**, and **materials** that will help guide your team as you develop your own social action project. Stay tuned - more details will be added here soon!
- Resources**: Materials and inspiration! Find here useful materials, readings, slides, and links from the sessions. This space will grow throughout the event - check back for updates! If you have a resource to share with others, feel free to post it here.
- Service-learning projects** (circled in red): Our Projects in Action! This is the heart of the Summer School: the projects! Each group will use this section to showcase the Service-Learning projects they've developed throughout the second and the third days. More information coming soon!
- Rate your experience** (circled in red): Your voice matters! We'd love to hear from you! Share your thoughts about the BOLD Summer School: *What inspired you? What could be improved? What will you take with you?* Leave a short message, reflection, or even just a word. Your feedback is important.

Data analysis

- Qualitative analysis
- Content analysis
- Teacher professional development, around three dimensions:
 1. Ethical and political dimension;
 2. Pedagogical and didactical dimension;
 3. Linguistic and communicative dimension.
- **PLUS:** one emergent dimension - research and transfer.



Ethical and political dimension

- I learned how I can promote diversity in a more differentiated and meaningful way and combine this with the long-term goal of inclusion (German student)
- I would highlight that having the opportunity to engage in direct dialogue with NGOs and participate in their social initiatives, has been especially meaningful to me as it has sparked my interest in future volunteer work. (Spanish student)
- I have learned how changes start small and how we can create a lot of different projects where everyone feels included and a part of a bigger group, no matter where they are from. (Dutch student)

Ethical and political dimension

- Undertaking a service-learning project has been enriching for me, raising my awareness of an inclusive, innovative, student-centered teaching practice and fostering a sense of responsibility in both myself and them. (Portuguese student)
- In our group we shared our multilingual experiences and how it feels to be part of a marginalized community. (German student)
- I got a better understanding of certain needs, hardships and prejudices that members of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community we collaborated with encounter in their daily lives and more specifically in cases they need to have access to medical assistance. (Greek student)

Conclusion

The integration of community engagement and service-learning principles in teacher education offers opportunities to enhance student teachers' professional development, namely:

- Recognition of the ethical and political dimensions of education;
- Recognition of the role of varied educational actors in the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity;
- Development of both declarative and procedural knowledge on culturally and linguistically responsive teaching;
- Acknowledgment of the importance of transversal and interdisciplinary approaches when educating for linguistic and cultural diversity;
- Awareness of how multilingualism functions in real-world settings.



**A transformative mindset:
not just “resistance to”
but “answer to”.**

BOLD project:

- positioned pre-service teachers as full partners in knowledge creation and builders of a better future, not just critics of the present;
- envisioned pre-service teacher programs as “laboratories” of social justice: places to start experimenting and practice inclusion, to conceptualise community-driven projects, and to imagine new and responsive pedagogies for their classrooms.

Contact



Literacy in Diversity Settings (LiDS)

University of Hamburg
Faculty of Education

Email: lids.ew@uni-hamburg.de

Web: <https://uhh.de/ew-lids>