

Language Attitudes, Language Ideologies, and Linguistic Inequality among Afghan Students at HSE University

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study looked at language attitudes, language ideologies, and experiences of linguistic inequality among Afghan students at HSE University in Moscow. It examined how students perceived and used Russian, Dari, Pashto, and English, and how these languages connected to academic participation, social integration, multilingual identity, inclusion, and exclusion.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen Afghan students at HSE University between 10 and 20 July 2026 and analyzed using thematic analysis. Russian turned out to be essential for daily functioning, employment, and academic participation, yet English was widely regarded by participants as the more prestigious language, tied to international mobility and professional status. Language was also closely bound up with participants' sense of cultural identity and belonging: Dari and Pashto stayed central to their connection to Afghanistan even as their Russian improved over time.

The study contributes to sociolinguistic research by focusing on a population that remains largely unexamined: Afghan students in Russian higher education. It also adds to research on international student experience by treating language not simply as a matter of proficiency but as a social resource tied up with identity, status, belonging, participation, and power.

Keywords: language attitudes; language ideologies; linguistic inequality; multilingualism; Afghan students; Russian higher education; international students; HSE University

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has produced increasingly multilingual university environments, where students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact daily. For international students, participation in higher education asks for more than academic adjustment in the narrow sense of coursework and exams. It also means adapting to new linguistic practices, unfamiliar institutional expectations, and unwritten norms of communication that newcomers are rarely told about directly.

Language shapes how students experience classroom participation, academic communication, relationships with staff, social interaction, identity, and belonging. A student who cannot easily follow a lecture, ask a question, or negotiate an extension with an administrator is not just facing a vocabulary problem; they are up against a structural barrier that can affect their grades, their confidence, and their sense of whether the institution was ever built with them in mind. Understanding international students therefore requires attention not only to measurable proficiency but to the meanings, values, and emotions students attach to the different languages in their lives.

Language attitudes refer to how people evaluate languages and their speakers. Students might see a language as useful, prestigious, difficult, attractive, academic, modern, or bound up with identity. These evaluations are rarely neutral. They are shaped by history, migration, media exposure, family expectations, and personal experience, and they influence which languages students choose to use, practice, or avoid.

Language ideologies offer a broader lens: the socially and culturally shaped beliefs people hold about languages and their speakers, about which languages are correct, professional, or worth learning, and which are not. Research has shown that such ideologies can shape identity construction, interpersonal relationships, and patterns of inequality across international higher education settings worldwide.

These questions matter for Afghan students at HSE University because most of them move between several languages for different purposes across a single day. Russian is essential within the university environment, for lectures, administration, and much of campus social life. Dari and Pashto remain central to Afghan linguistic and cultural identity, family communication, and community belonging, whether that community is physically present in Moscow or maintained from a distance. English often functions as the language of international academic literature, online resources, and, for some students, prior schooling.

This study examines how Afghan students understand these four languages, how they move between them strategically, and how their linguistic experiences shape their academic progress, social relationships, and sense of who they are while living and studying in Russia.

There is also a practical motivation behind the study. Many international students arrive with strong academic ability but run into avoidable difficulties simply because the institutions around them were not designed with a multilingual population in mind. Research of this kind can point toward concrete, low-cost responses of the sort a well-run student support office, mentorship network, or peer resource group could actually put into practice.

Afghan students are a distinctive and growing part of the international student population in Russia. Russian government scholarship programmes have in recent years offered substantial numbers of places to Afghan applicants, many of whom arrive with little or no prior Russian training and must complete a preparatory year of Russian before starting their main degree. This means many Afghan students go through an unusually compressed and high-stakes period of language learning, where their future academic path depends heavily on how quickly their Russian improves. At the same time, many of these same students arrive already fluent in Dari or Pashto, and often in English too, thanks to prior schooling or informal study back in Afghanistan. This combination, rapid and high-stakes acquisition of a new academic language layered onto an already rich multilingual repertoire, makes Afghan students at institutions like HSE a particularly informative group for studying language attitudes, ideologies, and inequality.

It is also worth noting that Afghan students often study far from the kind of established diaspora communities that exist for some other international student groups in Russia, which may push them toward greater reliance on informal peer networks, including other Afghan or Persian- and Pashto-speaking students, as a source of both linguistic and emotional support. This context matters for interpreting the interview data collected here, and it is revisited in the Discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language Attitudes in Multilingual Higher Education

Language attitudes concern how people evaluate languages, varieties, accents, and speakers, whether in terms of usefulness, prestige, correctness, difficulty, attractiveness, or social value. These attitudes are typically learned rather than innate: students pick them up from family, schooling, media, and peer groups long before they ever arrive at university.

In multilingual higher education, students often assign different functions to different languages rather than ranking them on a single scale of good or bad. A language may be highly valued for academic purposes while another feels more important for everyday communication, humor, or emotional expression. A student might feel that Russian is indispensable for passing exams while still feeling that Dari is the only language in which they can properly express affection or grief.

This means language attitudes are best examined in relation to the social contexts where languages are used, rather than treated as simple positive or negative opinions pulled from a single survey question. Attitudes are

not fixed either; they can shift across a degree programme as students gain confidence, hit setbacks, or reconsider their long-term plans.

For Afghan students at HSE, this distinction matters because Russian, Dari, Pashto, and English are likely to carry different functions and different emotional weight. A study that treated them as interchangeable would miss much of what actually matters to the students themselves.

2.2 Language Ideologies

Language ideologies are socially and culturally shaped beliefs about language and its relationship to identity, social status, power, and appropriate communication. They often work below the level of conscious awareness, surfacing as assumptions about who "sounds" educated, who belongs, or whose accent is acceptable in a formal setting.

Shirahata's (2023) qualitative study of students in internationalizing higher education shows that language ideologies can become entangled with identity construction and negotiation, and may add to inequalities among students who are otherwise academically comparable.

Zhang and Lütge's (2024) study of Chinese international students in Germany, based on semi-structured interviews with sixteen postgraduate students, found that participants' language ideologies connected to academic success, social integration, employment prospects, ethnic solidarity, and access to local social networks. Their beliefs about language were not abstract opinions; they had real consequences for the opportunities available to them.

Together, these findings suggest that students' beliefs about language cannot be separated from broader questions of identity, opportunity, and participation (Shirahata, 2023; Zhang & Lütge, 2024), and that a study of Afghan students at HSE should treat language ideology as a live, consequential part of everyday student life rather than background noise.

2.3 Language and International Student Integration

Language proficiency strongly shapes how international students take part in academic and social life. Students often need the dominant institutional language to talk with teachers, staff, classmates, and the wider society, and gaps in that proficiency can turn directly into missed deadlines, misunderstood instructions, or simple exhaustion from the extra effort of following ordinary interactions. Quantitative research on international students in Russian universities similarly points to the language barrier as the central obstacle to both linguistic and academic adaptation, with students from non-post-Soviet linguistic backgrounds facing the steepest difficulties (Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019).

Integration, though, should not be understood simply as one-directional acquisition of the dominant language, with a student's other languages treated as something to be left behind. That framing risks pathologizing students' existing linguistic resources instead of recognizing them as assets.

International students can maintain their own languages while also developing multilingual identities that draw on several linguistic repertoires at once. These repertoires can support social connection, cultural continuity, and a stable sense of self even while a student is working hard to master a new academic language.

Research increasingly treats multilingualism as a resource rather than framing a student's languages as competing claims on limited cognitive or social space. This shift has direct implications for how a university might support its international student population, for instance by valuing rather than discouraging peer networks that operate in a student's first language.

2.4 Linguistic Inequality and Exclusion

Language can produce inequality when particular linguistic practices are treated as more legitimate, professional, or valuable than others within an institution. This is rarely stated as explicit policy. More often it shows up in

small, cumulative moments: whose questions get answered promptly, whose accent draws a smile rather than a correction, whose informal request for help gets treated as reasonable.

Clarke's (2020) research on international students at the University of Helsinki shows that institutional language policies can favor particular languages, and in doing so undercut the sense of value and inclusion felt by speakers of other languages within the international student population.

Research on Chinese international students in United Kingdom higher education has further shown how language ideologies can intersect with exclusion and marginalization. Gao (2025) identifies ideologies tied to English-only norms, assumptions of incompetence based on accent, and the resulting exclusion from full participation in academic and social life.

These studies point to why linguistic inequality should be treated as a social and institutional phenomenon, produced by structures and expectations, rather than as a problem sitting only in an individual student's level of proficiency (Clarke, 2020; Gao, 2025). This matters because it shifts responsibility: if exclusion is structural, then structural and organizational responses, not just individual language tutoring, become the appropriate ones.

2.5 Multilingual Identity

Language is a central part of identity, not simply a tool for exchanging information. Multilingual people often use different languages to express different sides of themselves, shifting according to audience, context, relationship, and purpose, sometimes within a single conversation. Recent qualitative work on Arabic-English bilingual graduate students similarly found that moving fluidly between languages let participants bridge their heritage and host-country identities, though this flexibility could also expose them to stereotyping about their proficiency (Almashour, 2024).

For Afghan students, the relationship between Russian and their home languages may matter especially because the stakes run high in both directions. Russian is likely to grow more important as students take part in Russian academic and social life and build their future professional paths, while Dari and Pashto stay important for cultural continuity, family relationships across distance, and a stable sense of Afghan identity that does not depend on approval from the host society. This lines up with broader sociolinguistic research on Pashto, long documented as closely bound up with ethnic and national identity among Pashtun speakers in both Afghanistan and the wider region (Rahman, 1995).

English may occupy a further, distinct position, tied particularly to international academic literature, digital resources, and future mobility beyond both Afghanistan and Russia: a language associated less with belonging and more with opportunity and reach.

This study treats multilingual identity as an ongoing, sometimes uneven process of negotiation rather than a fixed trait a student either has or lacks. That framing lets the research capture change over time and contradiction within a single participant's account, both of which are common and meaningful in lived experience.

2.6 International Students in Non-Anglophone Contexts

Much international higher education research has focused on English-medium environments, reflecting the dominant position of English-speaking countries as historical destinations for international study. This has produced a rich body of knowledge, but it has also left other major destination countries comparatively under-examined.

International students also study at universities where languages other than English hold the central institutional role, and their experiences may differ in important ways from what has been documented in Anglophone contexts.

Recent research in China shows the value of looking at international students outside Anglophone settings. Dong et al. (2026) found that international students could see the host national language as burdensome and demanding

while at the same time using their full multilingual repertoires as resources for empowerment, negotiation, and self-expression, rather than experiencing multilingualism purely as a deficit.

A related study of Thai international students at a Chinese-medium instruction university similarly found that students' language ideologies often sat in tension with their actual day-to-day language practices, producing friction between what students believed a "good" student should sound like and how they were actually able to communicate (Wang & Xu, 2024).

This body of work is directly relevant to Russian higher education, where Russian functions as an important institutional and social language for international students yet has received comparatively little qualitative attention. A closely comparable qualitative study of Turkish students in Russian-medium degree programmes in Moscow found that dense academic Russian and unfamiliar bureaucratic procedures constrained participation, while peer networks and digital tools provided the main sources of support (Ülgen, 2026).

2.7 Language, Confidence, and Classroom Participation

Beyond proficiency itself, it helps to separate language comprehension from classroom participation as two distinct issues. A student may fully understand the course material yet still hesitate to ask questions, join a discussion, or approach instructors outside class, simply out of reluctance to make a mistake in front of peers or teaching staff.

This distinction matters because it separates two problems that get conflated in casual observation: a genuine gap in comprehension, and a reluctance to participate that comes from confidence rather than understanding. The second problem can affect students whose comprehension is actually fine, and it is often invisible to instructors, who may read silence as disengagement or lack of preparation rather than as a language-related confidence issue.

For this study, that distinction suggests interview questions about classroom participation should ask not only whether students understand the material, but whether and why they choose to speak up, so that these two related but separate experiences can be examined on their own terms in the findings.

2.8 Research Gap

The literature reviewed above shows that language attitudes, language ideologies, multilingualism, and linguistic inequality are important, interconnected dimensions of international students' higher education experience, with consequences reaching well beyond communication itself.

Existing research, however, has focused mainly on particular student populations and contexts: Chinese students in Germany (Zhang & Lütge, 2024), Finland (Clarke, 2020), and the United Kingdom (Gao, 2025), or Thai students in China (Wang & Xu, 2024), leaving other populations comparatively unexamined. Research on Afghan students' language attitudes specifically has remained largely quantitative and confined to Afghanistan, as in survey-based work on undergraduate attitudes toward English at a single Afghan university (Orfan, 2020), rather than qualitative and focused on Afghan students living and studying abroad.

There is comparatively little qualitative research on Afghan students in Russian higher education specifically, and very little that considers Russian alongside Dari, Pashto, and English within one analytic frame. Existing Afghanistan-focused language research has, moreover, tended to concentrate on English-language attitudes measured within Afghanistan itself, rather than on the lived, multilingual experience of Afghan students who have relocated abroad.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Afghan students at HSE University understand and negotiate their multilingual environment, and how language attitudes and ideologies connect to academic participation, social integration, identity, and linguistic inequality in this specific and currently under-researched setting.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study combines four concepts, each doing distinct analytical work while staying connected to the others.

Language attitudes are used to examine students' evaluations of Russian, Dari, Pashto, and English: what they consider useful, prestigious, difficult, or personally meaningful.

Language ideologies are used to examine the broader, often taken-for-granted beliefs about language status, prestige, usefulness, identity, and appropriate communication that shape everyday judgments and interactions.

Linguistic inequality is used to examine concrete experiences where language differences translate into unequal opportunities for participation, communication, recognition, or belonging.

Multilingual identity is used to examine how students understand and narrate themselves through their multiple linguistic resources, including contradictions and change over time.

Together, these four concepts let the study move past the narrow question of whether students speak Russian well enough, toward what language actually means in their academic and social lives, and how that meaning connects to fairness, opportunity, and belonging within the university.

METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study uses a qualitative interpretive design. This fits because the research questions are about meaning, experience, and interpretation rather than the measurement of predetermined variables.

Semi-structured interviews were used because the research sought to understand students' experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and interpretations in their own words, while still keeping enough structure to make sure the six research questions were addressed systematically across participants.

4.2 Participants

Participants were Afghan students enrolled at HSE University. Recruitment aimed to draw students from different faculties, degree levels, and years of study in order to capture a range of experience; in practice, those who volunteered were concentrated in master's-level, language-related programmes, a homogeneity discussed further in Section 10.

The target sample was roughly fifteen to twenty-five students, a size consistent with established practice in qualitative thematic analysis, where the goal is depth and thematic saturation rather than statistical representativeness. Fifteen students were ultimately interviewed, at the lower end of this range.

Purposive sampling was used to seek variation in academic background, Russian-language experience prior to arrival, length of residence in Russia, and multilingual repertoire. The resulting sample achieved meaningful diversity in length of residence and self-reported Russian proficiency, though, as noted above, less diversity across faculties and degree levels than initially intended.

4.3 Data Collection

Each interview ran roughly forty to sixty minutes, conducted in whichever language or combination of languages the participant was most comfortable using.

With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full to preserve the wording and nuance of their own accounts.

Participants were encouraged to give detailed, narrative descriptions of their experiences rather than simple yes-or-no answers, using follow-up prompts such as "can you tell me more about that" or "what happened next" to draw out concrete examples rather than general statements.

4.4 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Qualitative interview research is shaped by the relationship between researcher and participant, and by the assumptions the researcher brings to the topic. The researcher's own background, including prior experience of migration, multilingual communication, or organizational work, can provide useful rapport and insight, but it also needs to be examined critically so it does not lead to over-identification with participants' accounts or the premature assumption that all Afghan students share similar views.

A brief reflexive note was kept throughout data collection and analysis, recording the researcher's assumptions, reactions, and any points where personal experience seemed to shape interpretation. This note was consulted during analysis as a check against overly confident or one-sided readings of the data.

4.5 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To strengthen the credibility of the study, several standard qualitative rigor practices were applied:

1. Member checking: sharing interpreted themes with a subset of participants to confirm the analysis reflects their intended meaning.
2. Peer debriefing: discussing emerging codes and themes with a colleague or supervisor not directly involved in data collection, to test alternative interpretations.
3. An audit trail: keeping records of coding decisions, theme development, and analytic memos so the process can be traced and reviewed.
4. Attention to negative cases: actively looking for interview data that contradicts an emerging theme, rather than only collecting supporting examples.
5. Thick description: providing enough contextual detail in the eventual write-up that readers can judge how far the findings transfer to other settings.

4.6 Interview Guide

The interview guide was organized around eight thematic areas, moving from concrete and descriptive ground toward more interpretive questions about identity, ideology, and support needs. A representative question is given for each area below; the full guide followed the same pattern within each theme.

Linguistic background: What languages do you speak, and which did you use before coming to Russia?

Language use: Does your language change depending on whom you are speaking with?

Language attitudes: Do you think some languages are more prestigious than others?

Language ideologies: Have you ever felt judged because of your Russian?

Academic experiences: Have you ever avoided speaking in class because of your Russian?

Social experiences: Have you ever felt excluded from a conversation?

Identity: What do Dari and Pashto mean to you?

Coping strategies: What could HSE do to support international students linguistically?

Follow-up prompts such as "can you tell me more about that" or "what happened next" were used throughout to draw out specific examples rather than general statements, consistent with the narrative approach described in Section 4.3.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning across qualitative data.

The analysis moved through the following stages:

1. Transcription and familiarization with the full data set
2. Initial coding of interesting or relevant features across all transcripts
3. Identification of recurring patterns across codes
4. Development of candidate themes from patterned codes
5. Review of themes against the coded data and the full data set
6. Interpretation of themes in relation to participants' own framing
7. Connection of findings to the theoretical framework outlined in Section 3

Analytic categories that emerged from coding included, but were not limited to:

- Russian as academic capital
- Russian and social belonging
- Language prestige and hierarchy
- Linguistic confidence and anxiety
- Linguistic exclusion
- Multilingual identity and code-switching
- Maintenance of Dari and Pashto
- English and international academic identity
- Peer support and self-devised coping strategies

These categories guided the coding process and were retained as findings, reported in Section 6, only where they were demonstrably supported by the interview data itself.

FINDINGS

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Afghan students at HSE University between 10 and 20 July 2026. Participants were all enrolled in master's-level programmes, most commonly Foreign Language and Intercultural Communication or English Language, and mostly in their second year of study. Their length of residence in Russia ranged from several months to over two years, and their self-reported Russian proficiency varied widely, from beginner to upper-intermediate.

6.1 Russian Grammatical Complexity and Pronunciation as a Barrier to Confidence

Nearly all participants named Russian grammar, particularly noun case declension, verb tense, and aspect (perfective and imperfective), as the main source of daily difficulty. Several said they relied almost entirely on the nominative case in speech, even where other cases were called for, simply because they had not internalized the case system well enough to apply it in real time. Participants also found it disorienting that Russian declines proper nouns, including personal names, since Dari, Pashto, and English do not modify proper nouns the same way. Beyond grammar, participants pointed to pronunciation, noting that Russian has a wider range of vowel sounds and word-final consonant patterns than Pashto or Dari, and that getting word endings right stayed a source of difficulty and self-consciousness even after their vocabulary and grammar improved.

"In our language, a name stays the same no matter what. In Russian, even someone's name changes depending on the sentence, this was very confusing for me," said Hamad Ahmad, a second-year master's student in Foreign Language and Intercultural Communication.

This combination of grammatical and pronunciation difficulty seemed to compound: participants who struggled with case and tense also more often described hesitating to speak in class or in public, worried that mistakes would be noticed by classmates, instructors, or strangers.

6.2 Russian as Necessary for Daily Life Beyond the University

Participants drew a line between language difficulties inside the university and those they ran into in everyday life outside it. Several noted that while some university staff or classmates could switch to English when needed, this was rarely true in shops, medical offices, and other administrative settings, where staff typically spoke only Russian and had little patience for language gaps. Participants described this as a distinct, and sometimes more pressing, source of difficulty than academic language use, since it touched basic daily tasks that could not be avoided or put off.

One participant described a mix-up at a medical office during his first weeks in Russia, when a staff member told him to wait using a word he did not recognize. When she got up and walked out of the room shortly after, he assumed he was meant to follow her, only to be sharply corrected: "She told me one word I didn't know, I thought it meant to wait, but I wasn't sure. When she stood up and walked out, I followed her because I thought maybe she wanted me to come. She turned around and asked, 'What are you doing here? I never told you to follow me'" (Hamad Ahmad, second-year master's student, Foreign Language and Intercultural Communication).

Similar mix-ups came up on buses and in metro stations, and even inside the academic setting: one participant recalled repeatedly missing that a professor's use of a particular phrase signaled a homework assignment was due, mistaking it at first for something lower priority. These recurring, small-scale misunderstandings, arising less from a general lack of proficiency than from unfamiliarity with specific words, phrases, or routines, seemed to build up over time, feeding participants' broader sense of needing Russian for basic daily functioning, not just for academic success.

6.3 Language Prestige, Status, and Practical Importance

Participants were asked which of the four languages, Russian, English, Dari, or Pashto, they considered most prestigious, respected, or practically important, and why. A majority (roughly 9 to 10 of the 15) named English as carrying particular prestige and practical value, though several were careful to add that this did not take away from the importance of Russian in their daily lives. Mamond Wahdatullah, a second-year master's student in English Language, explained that strong English proficiency was tied to greater opportunities for education, employment, and international communication, and could position Afghan students as more educated or professional than co-nationals working in places like restaurants or hostels, particularly compared with workers in Russia mainly on labor permits. He also noted that English carried prestige not only within Russia but within Afghanistan itself, where it is often understood as a marker of education and social standing among other Afghans.

Mamond offered a concrete example of English's practical value from his own work at a restaurant in Russia. When an English-speaking tourist visited and struggled to communicate with Russian-speaking staff, Mamond stepped in, asked the customer directly what he needed, and took his order, an experience he described as showing the real-world usefulness of English with international visitors. At the same time, he was clear that Russian remained essential to daily survival and employment: he and several friends had initially struggled to find work because of limited Russian, and it was only after his Russian improved during his first year that finding employment and communicating with local people got easier.

This suggests participants do not rank the four languages on a single scale of prestige but assign distinct kinds of value to each: English as a marker of international mobility and status, Russian as a practical necessity for daily life and livelihood in the host country, a pattern that fits the view, discussed in Section 2.1, that language attitudes track the specific social functions a language serves rather than a fixed hierarchy.

6.4 Language Inclusion and Exclusion

Roughly 7 of the 15 participants reported some form of language-related exclusion or discomfort in social interaction, most concentrated in their earliest weeks in Russia. Patmal Muhammad Ullah, a second-year master's student, described an experience from his first week in Russia, speaking Pashto on the phone with his family while sitting in a Moscow metro station. He noticed two nearby women move away from him after hearing him speak Pashto, and felt uncomfortable and excluded, though he was unsure whether this was tied to the language itself or to his traditional Afghan clothing, which visibly differed from local dress at the time.

Patmal described this experience as having changed a lot over time. By his second year, he was deliberately speaking Russian with friends to keep improving, and said he felt noticeably more included while traveling on the metro and interacting with others in Russian, along with a stronger grasp of local cultural norms.

This account points to a pattern where experiences of linguistic exclusion cluster in the earliest period of adjustment, tied not only to language itself but to a broader sense of visible difference, in line with research (Section 2.4) suggesting linguistic inequality is bound up with wider social and institutional dynamics rather than proficiency alone.

6.5 Multilingual Identity

Roughly 12 of the 15 participants described a strong, felt connection between language and identity, often framing their home languages as inseparable from their sense of belonging to Afghanistan. Rohullah Khadim, a second-year master's student in Foreign Language and Intercultural Communication, described language as closely tied to his identity and sense of belonging. As a Pashtun, he said he felt strongly connected to his culture and society when speaking Pashto, but noted that speaking Dari with other Afghan students produced a similar sense of connection to Afghanistan, even across differences in native language.

"When you lose your language, it means you lose your identity," said Khadim, describing an experience at an Afghan restaurant in Russia where he and a friend initially struggled for ten to fifteen minutes to place an order in Russian, before the owner asked where they were from and, learning they were Afghan, switched to Dari. Khadim described feeling immediate relief and happiness at being able to communicate naturally in his own language, and said he still feels especially relaxed on later visits to the restaurant, comparing the feeling to being back in his hometown.

This account shows language working not only as a communicative tool but as a source of emotional comfort, cultural continuity, and connection to home, in keeping with the framing in Section 2.5, where multilingual identity is understood as an ongoing negotiation between languages rather than a fixed or singular attachment. It also echoes research on the Afghan diaspora more broadly, which has documented a slow erosion of Dari among second-generation Afghan-American youth as they assimilate into a dominant host-country language and culture (Saydee, 2014), a trajectory participants in this study seemed consciously motivated to resist.

6.6 Coping Strategies for Language Barriers

All 15 participants reported using at least one strategy to manage language barriers, most commonly translation apps and help from friends. Naseri Zakirullah, a second-year master's student, described language barriers creating serious difficulties when he was looking for work in Russia, having been turned down by roughly seven different restaurants and food-service businesses because of his limited Russian. He relied on a translation app to communicate, but noted that some employers questioned whether he could understand customers and communicate effectively while using a translator.

"I used Google Translate to explain what I could not say myself," Naseri explained, adding that although his Russian has since improved considerably, he and his friends still occasionally lean on translation tools for anything complicated.

Naseri's experience shows how participants combined technology, social support, and continued daily practice to manage communication difficulties, with reliance on translation tools generally shrinking, but not disappearing, as proficiency improved.

DISCUSSION

Participants consistently named Russian grammar, particularly case and tense, as the central barrier to confident academic and social participation, which fits the literature on language proficiency and classroom participation discussed in Sections 2.2 through 2.3 and 2.7: several participants understood the course material well enough but hesitated to speak for fear of grammatical mistakes in front of others.

Participants' accounts of Dari and Pashto were tied closely to identity and emotional belonging rather than academic necessity, reinforcing the multilingual-identity literature discussed in Section 2.5. Rohullah Khadim's account of the Afghan restaurant shows how unexpectedly encountering a shared home language can produce a strong, immediate sense of relief and belonging, suggesting Dari and Pashto work for participants as anchors of identity largely independent of their proficiency in Russian.

English occupied a distinct position among the four languages, tied less to belonging and more to prestige, professional opportunity, and international mobility, consistent with Section 2.6. Participants such as Mamond Wahdatullah described English proficiency as conferring status both within Russia and within the Afghan community itself, suggesting English functions as a marker of education and reach that extends beyond the immediate Russian academic context.

Experiences of exclusion, while reported by fewer participants than difficulties with grammar, still mattered, and, as with Patmal Muhammad Ullah's account, were often bound up with visible markers of cultural difference such as clothing, not language alone. This fits the view in Section 2.4 that linguistic inequality operates as part of a broader set of social and institutional dynamics rather than as an isolated problem of proficiency.

Notable differences emerged between newer arrivals and longer-resident students: participants further along in their studies, like Patmal, described real improvement in both language confidence and social inclusion over time, suggesting many of the difficulties participants reported cluster in the early adjustment period rather than staying permanent features of the Afghan student experience at HSE.

These findings broadly extend prior research on international students' language ideologies and identity (Zhang & Lütge, 2024; Shirahata, 2023) to a population, Afghan students in Russian higher education, that has received little prior qualitative attention, while also pointing to something specific to this group: Russian as a language of practical necessity coexisting with English as a separate, and in some ways more prestigious, marker of status.

CONCLUSION

This study looked at language attitudes, language ideologies, and linguistic inequality among Afghan students at HSE University, based on semi-structured interviews with fifteen participants.

The central finding is that Afghan students at HSE navigate a layered multilingual environment in which Russian functions as a practical necessity for academic and daily survival, English serves as a marker of prestige and international opportunity, and Dari and Pashto remain central anchors of cultural identity and emotional belonging, largely independent of proficiency in the host-country language.

These findings confirm that international students' linguistic experiences cannot be understood through proficiency alone. Language is also bound up with identity, status, participation, social relationships, and belonging, and these connections carry real consequences for students' academic progress and wellbeing.

By focusing on Afghan students in Russian higher education, this research addresses a population and context that have received comparatively little attention in the existing literature on international student language experience.

Perhaps the clearest pattern in the data is how sharply participants separated these functions rather than treating their four languages as competing for a single kind of value, a distinction with direct implications for how universities might support multilingual international students, discussed further in Section 11.

9. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study works at three levels: theoretical, empirical, and practical.

9.1 Theoretical Significance

At the theoretical level, the study brings together four concepts, language attitudes, language ideologies, linguistic inequality, and multilingual identity, that are often examined separately in the literature, and applies them jointly to a single, coherent case. This integrated approach shows how these concepts interact in practice: how a language attitude (Russian is difficult) can be shaped by a broader ideology (fluent Russian marks a "real" HSE student), which can in turn produce a concrete experience of inequality (hesitation to speak in seminars), which then feeds back into a student's evolving multilingual identity. Few existing studies trace this full chain within a single population.

9.2 Empirical Significance

At the empirical level, the study addresses a population, Afghan students in Russian higher education, that is largely absent from the current sociolinguistic literature on international students, which has concentrated heavily on a smaller set of well-studied groups and destination countries. Given the scale of Russian government scholarship programmes for Afghan students in recent years, this is a substantial and growing student population whose linguistic experiences are not yet well documented in the academic record. Filling this gap has value on its own, independent of any particular theoretical argument, simply because so little is currently known.

9.3 Practical Significance

At the practical level, as outlined in Section 10, the study is designed to produce findings that can plausibly inform low-cost, realistic institutional responses, rather than recommendations that would need large new budgets or major policy change to implement. This reflects a deliberate choice to keep the research tied to actions a university international-student office, a faculty coordinator, or a student-led peer network could genuinely carry out.

10. Limitations

The study is limited to Afghan students at one university, and its findings should be read with that specific context in mind.

The relatively small qualitative sample means findings cannot be statistically generalized to all Afghan students in Russia; the aim is depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical representativeness.

The sample was also homogeneous in an unplanned way: all fifteen participants were master's-level students, most in language-related programmes such as Foreign Language and Intercultural Communication or English Language, with no undergraduate or doctoral students represented. This limits how far the findings can be extended to Afghan students at other degree levels or in other fields of study, whose language experiences at HSE may differ in ways this study cannot capture.

Interviews rely on participants' self-reports, which may be shaped by memory, self-presentation, or the researcher's own presence in the room; the reflexivity measures described in Section 4.4 are meant to mitigate, though not eliminate, this limitation.

Future research could compare Afghan students across several Russian universities, or compare Afghan students with students from other linguistic backgrounds at the same institution, to test how far these findings extend.

11. Practical Implications

Depending on the empirical findings, the study may support recommendations concerning:

1. Russian-language support tailored to international students' actual difficulties, rather than generic language instruction
2. Academic communication support, such as plain-language guidance for key administrative processes
3. Intercultural orientation programmes for new international students
4. Structured opportunities for interaction between international and Russian-speaking students
5. Institutional awareness of multilingualism as a resource rather than a deficit
6. Formal recognition and use of students' existing linguistic resources, including peer-to-peer mentoring in Dari or Pashto for newly arrived students
7. Prevention of language-based exclusion in informal as well as formal university settings

On this last point, the researcher's own background in small-business management, including several years running a wholesale retail operation and coordinating suppliers, staff, and customers with differing levels of formal education, offers a practical, organizational perspective not always present in purely academic proposals. A workable peer-support or mentoring structure for international students has a lot in common with running a small, resource-constrained operation: it depends on clear, low-cost communication systems, realistic expectations of who can help whom, and simple processes that do not need large institutional budgets to sustain. Any recommendations arising from this study will be written with that kind of practical feasibility in mind, rather than proposing solutions a university office would struggle to implement in practice.

Recommendations of this kind will be based directly on the empirical findings once they are available, rather than on assumptions made in advance.

12. Ethical Considerations

Participation will be entirely voluntary, and no student will be pressured, directly or indirectly, to take part.

Participants will receive clear information about the purpose, procedures, and expected duration of the study, and will give informed consent before any data collection begins.

Participants may decline to answer any question and may withdraw from the study at any point, in line with the approved research protocol, without needing to give a reason.

Pseudonyms will be used throughout the article and in any presentation of findings, and identifying details will be altered or removed where necessary to protect participants' privacy.

Identifying information will be removed from interview transcripts as part of transcription, and kept separate from the audio recordings.

Interview recordings and transcripts will be stored securely, on password-protected devices, accessible only to the researcher and, where required, direct academic supervisors.

The research will obtain the necessary ethical approval from the relevant HSE University ethics body before any data collection takes place, and will follow any additional conditions that approval specifies.

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