Research Capacity Building and Overcoming Communication Challenges: Insights from a Multi-Country Erasmus+ CBHE Project

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Abstract

This study examines how the Building Social Research Capacity in Higher Education Institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia (BRECIL) Erasmus$^+$ CBHE Project strengthened research capacity while navigating multilingual communication challenges. The consortium comprised seven partners: two from Malaysia, two from Laos, and three from Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden). Within this multilingual context, the study addressed three questions: (i) How did the project build institutional and individual research capacity? (ii) What language and communication barriers constrained collaboration? (iii) Which strategies supported effective knowledge exchange? Using a qualitative approach, data were drawn from project reports, interviews with academic staff, and participant reflections. Thematic analysis highlighted processes of capacity building, academic communication, and cross-cultural collaboration. Findings indicate that the project enhanced institutional structures, improved staff skills in academic writing and digital methods, and created opportunities for international collaboration. Challenges included limited English proficiency, low confidence in publishing, and intercultural communication gaps. Yet the consortium's linguistic diversity enriched discussions and promoted intercultural learning. Writing workshops, mentoring in publication, and structured language support were particularly effective in reducing barriers to academic writing, publishing, and cross-cultural communication. The study concludes that research capacity building in multilingual partnerships should integrate linguistic and intercultural support. It demonstrates how Erasmus$^+$ collaborations can strengthen research culture while transforming linguistic diversity into a resource for innovation and sustainable academic development.

Keywords: communication challenges, research capacity building, higher education, sustainable development

Introduction

Global higher education is increasingly shaped by multilingual and transnational collaboration. Within this evolving landscape, language and communication—core concerns of applied linguistics—serve not only as tools for research but also as drivers of inclusion, sustainability, and innovation. The rise of international consortia, digital knowledge exchange, and cross-

border partnerships has transformed how universities conceptualize capacity building and academic development (Knight, 2020; Tran & Nguyen, 2022). Such collaborations depend on more than funding and infrastructure; they rely on shared understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries, making communication a central determinant of success (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012).

The European Union's Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) programme exemplifies this global shift. Designed to strengthen the modernisation and internationalisation of higher education institutions (HEIs) in partner countries, CBHE projects aim to foster institutional resilience, human capital development, and intercultural exchange (European Commission, 2022). These projects often involve partners from both Europe and Asia, creating contexts rich in linguistic and cultural diversity. Yet, despite their increasing prominence, the communicative dimensions of such collaborations—how partners negotiate meaning, share knowledge, and co-construct understanding—remain underexplored in research on international higher education.

This paper focuses on one such initiative: the Building Social Research Capacity in Higher Education Institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia (BRECIL) project, which ran from 2017 to 2021. The project involved seven partners: two from Malaysia, two from Laos, and three from Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden). Its overarching goal was to enhance social research capacity through training, mentoring, and the digitalisation of research processes. In practice, BRECIL sought to build institutional structures for research governance, strengthen academic writing and publication competencies, and promote sustainable collaboration across partner universities. Alongside these objectives, the project confronted a persistent yet productive challenge: multilingual communication in transnational academic settings.

In this respect, BRECIL presents a compelling case for examining how applied linguistics intersects with development cooperation and higher education reform. While institutional strengthening and research training are critical, language practices and communication dynamics often determine the inclusiveness and sustainability of capacity-building outcomes. As Canagarajah (2013) and Flowerdew (2019) argue, English has become the de facto lingua franca of academia, but its dominance can also reproduce linguistic inequalities and marginalize voices from non-Anglophone contexts. Within the BRECIL consortium, participants from Malaysia and Laos engaged with European partners through English as a working language, creating both opportunities for mutual learning and challenges related to proficiency, confidence, and intercultural communication.

The study is guided by three key questions:

1. How did the project build institutional and individual research capacity?
2. What language and communication barriers constrained collaboration?
3. Which strategies supported effective knowledge exchange?

Through these questions, the study situates applied linguistics within the broader agenda of international development and academic cooperation, emphasizing that communication is not peripheral but constitutive of capacity building itself. By examining how multilingual teams co-create meaning and negotiate research knowledge, the paper contributes to understanding how linguistic diversity can evolve from a challenge into a resource for sustainable academic development.

Theoretical Orientation

This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructivism and Communities of Practice (CoP). Social Constructivism, derived from the work of Vygotsky (1978), posits that knowledge is not transmitted but constructed through social interaction and shared meaning-making. Learning and capacity building, in this view, occur within collaborative activities where participants engage in dialogue, negotiation, and reflection. In multilingual settings, this process becomes especially complex and meaningful, as language itself mediates how knowledge is created and interpreted (Lantolf, 2000).

The Communities of Practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) complements this view by highlighting how groups of practitioners develop shared repertoires, norms, and understandings through sustained interaction. Within a community of practice, learning is situated in which it arises from participation in joint projects and mutual engagement. In the BRECIL context, the consortium functioned as a community of practice where European, Malaysian, and Lao academics collaborated across linguistic and cultural differences to co-construct research capacity. This lens allows exploration of how communication practices, formal and informal, shaped the learning community, revealing how participants navigated asymmetries of power, language, and institutional expertise.

Together, these theoretical perspectives position research capacity building as both a cognitive and communicative process. They underscore that capacity is developed not simply through workshops or training sessions, but through dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding, all mediated by language and culture. Thus, language becomes both a medium and a metaphor for transformation: it connects institutions, bridges disciplinary and national boundaries, and enables the joint creation of knowledge.

Relevance and Contribution

This study is aligned with the MAALIC 2025 theme, *"Applied Linguistics for Global Challenges: Sustainability, Inclusion, and Innovation."* It foregrounds how applied linguistics offers tools and insights to address practical issues of communication, equity, and participation in international higher education. While many capacity-building projects report on measurable outcomes—such as improved research policies or increased publication rates—few critically examine the linguistic and intercultural processes through which such outcomes are achieved. By doing so, this paper expands the scope of applied linguistics to include the sociolinguistic realities of collaboration, especially in Southeast Asian contexts where multilingualism and power differentials in English use are highly salient.

Moreover, the study contributes empirically by documenting the strategies used within BRECIL to bridge communication gaps: structured writing workshops, mentoring schemes, translanguaging practices, and the use of digital tools for asynchronous communication. Analytically, it contributes by theorising the intersection between capacity building and communicative practice, showing how these two domains co-evolve. Conceptually, it challenges the notion of language as a barrier, proposing instead that linguistic diversity can be harnessed as a driver of creative collaboration and intercultural learning (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012).

Ultimately, this paper argues that sustainable international partnerships depend on linguistic equity, communicative competence, and intercultural sensitivity. As higher education becomes increasingly globalised, the ability to collaborate effectively across languages and cultures becomes a fundamental component of research capacity itself. Thus, this study not only documents a project outcome but also advances a broader argument: that language is central to building resilient, inclusive, and innovative research ecosystems in the Global South and beyond.

Literature Review

Research Capacity Building in Higher Education

Research capacity building (RCB) has emerged as a central theme in international higher education, particularly in developing and transitional contexts. It refers to the systematic strengthening of the skills, infrastructure, and institutional culture necessary for sustainable research performance (Cooke, 2005). According to Tight (2018), RCB encompasses individual and collective competencies that enable universities to generate, manage, and disseminate knowledge effectively. In developing regions, where resources and research culture may be unevenly distributed, capacity building aims to redress structural inequalities and promote global participation in knowledge production (Mukherjee & Wong, 2020).

Within the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) framework, projects are designed to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in aligning with international standards while maintaining local relevance. These projects often target areas such as curriculum reform, governance, digital transformation, and research development (European Commission, 2022). As Tran and Nguyen (2022) observe, capacity building in such settings transcends technical skill acquisition; it involves building institutional environments that nurture academic inquiry, critical reflection, and intercultural understanding.

In practice, however, RCB is not a neutral process. Power asymmetries between Northern and Southern partners, linguistic hierarchies, and differing academic traditions can shape the nature of collaboration (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). While European partners often bring established systems and publication cultures, Asian partners contribute contextual knowledge, local engagement, and adaptability. Successful capacity building therefore requires mutuality, reciprocity, and dialogue (Cartwright & Bovill, 2020). It depends on building trust and shared understanding—processes that are inherently communicative and often linguistically mediated.

Language, Multilingualism, and Communication in International Collaboration

Language plays a central role in transnational higher education partnerships. It is both a medium of communication and a symbol of inclusion or exclusion. English has become the dominant lingua franca of academia, serving as the primary language for research dissemination, publishing, and collaboration (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012). While this dominance facilitates global connectivity, it also reinforces linguistic inequalities, often privileging native or near-native speakers and marginalising others (Flowerdew, 2019).

For scholars from non-Anglophone contexts, limited proficiency in academic English can constrain participation in international projects and publishing networks (Curry & Lillis, 2018). As a result, language functions as a gatekeeper to academic visibility and legitimacy. Mauranen (2012) notes that communication in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts involves constant negotiation of meaning, where speakers adjust, accommodate, and co-construct understanding across linguistic differences. This dynamic, while challenging, can also foster linguistic innovation and intercultural empathy.

Applied linguistics research has increasingly explored the concept of translanguaging—the flexible and dynamic use of multiple linguistic resources within interaction (Canagarajah, 2013). In international projects, translanguaging allows participants to draw on their full linguistic repertoires to clarify complex ideas, build rapport, and create shared meanings. García and Wei (2014) argue that translanguaging not only facilitates communication but also repositions multilingualism as an asset rather than a deficiency. In multilingual consortia like

BRECIL, such practices can transform potential barriers into opportunities for creative negotiation and inclusive participation.

Intercultural communication competence is another key factor shaping collaboration. Deardorff (2016) defines this competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural contexts, grounded in attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect. Within academic partnerships, this competence underpins how participants interpret feedback, engage in joint decision-making, and manage conflict. Misalignment in communication styles, such as directness, deference, or turn-taking, can lead to misunderstanding or perceived imbalance (Holliday, 2011). Thus, successful capacity building depends not only on linguistic proficiency but also on intercultural sensitivity and relational awareness.

Communication and Power in Transnational Higher Education

Language in international collaboration is inseparable from questions of power, identity, and epistemic inequality. Phillipson (2017) and Pennycook (2018) highlight that English dominance in global academia mirrors broader patterns of knowledge colonisation, where Western epistemologies and linguistic norms often define what counts as "quality" research. This can result in asymmetrical relationships between partners, where those from the Global South may internalise deficit perspectives about their linguistic or scholarly capacity.

Scholars such as Canagarajah (2013) and Kubota (2020) call for a more plurilingual and decolonial orientation in academic collaboration—one that values diverse ways of knowing and communicating. In practice, this means recognising the legitimacy of different Englishes, local languages, and discursive styles within international research. For projects like BRECIL, this perspective is particularly relevant: participants from Laos and Malaysia bring distinct linguistic and cultural capital that enrich rather than dilute the collaborative process.

Language also intersects with institutional culture and professional identity. In academic communities, how one writes, speaks, and presents knowledge reflects one's epistemological stance and disciplinary belonging (Hyland, 2019). In cross-cultural teams, divergent norms regarding hierarchy, critique, and authorship can influence participation. For instance, participants from collectivist cultures may show deference to senior researchers, while European counterparts may expect more assertive dialogue. Without awareness of these differences, communication gaps can emerge, subtly shaping who speaks, who leads, and whose knowledge is foregrounded (Tange & Lauring, 2009).

Theoretical Perspectives: Social Constructivism and Communities of Practice

The theoretical grounding for this study lies in Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000) and Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Both perspectives illuminate the social nature of learning and collaboration in multilingual academic environments.

From a social constructivist standpoint, knowledge is co-created through interaction, dialogue, and shared activity. Learning occurs as participants engage with one another, negotiate meaning, and internalise new understandings within a social context. In a multilingual project like BRECIL, this process is mediated by language, which acts as both a cognitive tool and a cultural bridge. As Lantolf (2000) explains, language enables learners to articulate and refine thought; through collaborative communication, they construct shared frameworks of understanding.

The Communities of Practice framework offers a complementary perspective. Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualise learning as situated within a community where members share

goals and engage in mutual learning. Participation is a continuum—from peripheral observation to full engagement—as individuals gradually acquire competence and confidence. In BRECIL, European, Malaysian, and Lao partners formed such a community through workshops, mentoring, and digital collaboration. Over time, shared repertoires of practice—writing conventions, feedback styles, and communication norms—emerged, exemplifying Wenger's (1998) assertion that learning is a socially negotiated process.

Integrating these frameworks allows us to understand research capacity building as both a cognitive and communicative enterprise. Capacity is not transferred from one partner to another but co-constructed through ongoing dialogue and reflection. This approach shifts the focus from "training recipients" to active participants in a joint learning process, thereby aligning with contemporary views of equitable and inclusive international collaboration (Tran & Nguyen, 2022).

Gaps in the Literature and the Present Study

Although extensive research exists on capacity building and internationalisation in higher education, few studies explicitly examine the linguistic and communicative dimensions of research partnerships. Most literature on Erasmus+ and similar programmes highlights structural achievements—such as enhanced governance, improved curricula, and increased publication output (European Commission, 2022)—but seldom analyses how everyday communication practices shape those outcomes.

Moreover, studies that do address language issues often treat them as secondary challenges rather than as central to the process of collaboration (Cartwright & Bovill, 2020). There remains a need for empirical accounts that explore how multilingual communication affects knowledge exchange, identity negotiation, and equity in capacity building. In Southeast Asia, where linguistic diversity and varying English proficiency levels are the norm, this inquiry is particularly timely (Nguyen & Burns, 2017).

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating how the BRECIL Erasmus+ project strengthened research capacity while navigating multilingual communication challenges. It contributes to the literature by (i) highlighting the communicative dimensions of capacity building, (ii) demonstrating how multilingualism can be a resource rather than a constraint, and (iii) proposing strategies for fostering inclusive, linguistically aware collaboration in international higher education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how multilingual collaboration unfolded within the *Building Social Research Capacity in Higher Education Institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia (BRECIL)* consortium. A qualitative case study approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth examination of social processes within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). Given that BRECIL involved complex, culturally diverse interactions across institutional and national boundaries, this design enabled the researcher to capture nuanced experiences, communication dynamics, and capacity-building outcomes as they evolved over time.

Case studies are particularly suitable for projects where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (Stake, 2005). In this instance, language practices, institutional culture, and research development were deeply interwoven. Rather than attempting to isolate variables, the study aimed to understand how participants constructed meaning through interaction and

how multilingual communication shaped the collaborative process. The qualitative orientation aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which values participants' subjective perspectives and social realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Case Context

BRECIL was a European Union–funded Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) project implemented between 2017 and 2021. The consortium comprised seven partner institutions: two from Malaysia, two from the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and three from Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden). The project's overarching objective was to strengthen institutional and individual capacities for social science research through training, mentoring, digitalisation, and policy development.

In practice, this entailed a range of collaborative activities, including capacity-building workshops, online mentoring sessions, joint research training modules, and evaluation meetings. English was the main working language, yet participants also used Lao, Malay, and occasionally German or Dutch in internal exchanges and informal communication. This multilingual reality provided fertile ground for examining how linguistic and cultural diversity intersected with research capacity building.

Data Sources

Data were drawn from multiple documentary and experiential sources, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the consortium's processes and outcomes. The study primarily analysed textual and reflective materials produced during the life of the project, complemented by insights from selected interviews and participant feedback.

1. Project documentation:

A rich corpus of internal documents—including progress reports, training materials, meeting minutes, and evaluation records—was reviewed. These materials provided evidence of how institutional strategies evolved, how capacity-building priorities were set, and how communication practices were negotiated among partners. The documents were particularly valuable in tracing the longitudinal development of collaborative mechanisms and the institutionalisation of research support systems.

2. Semi-structured interviews:

To complement documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten academic staff from Laos and Malaysia, and three European partners involved in training and coordination. These participants represented various academic roles—administrators, project coordinators, and workshop facilitators—offering diverse perspectives on collaboration. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person and lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. The flexible format allowed participants to reflect on communication experiences, challenges, and perceived gains in research capacity.

3. Participant reflections:

The study also drew on reflective accounts embedded in post-activity reports and workshop evaluations. These reflections provided first-hand narratives of intercultural interaction, language negotiation, and learning moments. While not all reflections were systematically solicited, they offered spontaneous insight into participants' evolving understanding of multilingual collaboration and inclusion.

This multi-source design ensured that both formal and informal dimensions of the consortium's communication were captured, supporting a holistic interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis, which is well suited to exploring patterns within qualitative data. The six stages—familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme review, definition, and reporting—were applied iteratively to ensure analytic depth and coherence.

Initially, all documents and interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity and to identify recurrent ideas related to research capacity development, communication barriers, and collaborative strategies. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing pre-existing categories. Codes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting how language and communication practices shaped the consortium's functioning.

Triangulation across documentary, interview, and reflective sources enhanced the reliability and validity of findings (Denzin, 2012). For example, patterns observed in reports—such as changes in institutional reporting standards—were cross-checked against interview accounts and workshop reflections. Divergent cases were examined carefully to ensure that the analysis represented the full complexity of the multilingual collaboration. NVivo software was used to manage and code textual data systematically.

The interpretive process remained reflexive: the researcher continuously reflected on positionality as an observer interpreting multilingual communication within a transnational partnership. This reflexivity helped mitigate potential bias and promoted transparency in the analytic process (Finlay, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all interviewees. To protect confidentiality, all names of individuals and institutions have been anonymised or replaced with pseudonyms. Data were stored securely, and only aggregated results are reported.

Given the small and interconnected nature of the consortium, maintaining anonymity required particular care in how quotations were presented. Descriptive details that might inadvertently identify participants were removed or generalised. The ethical stance of the research was guided by the principles of respect, beneficence, and transparency, consistent with standard qualitative research ethics (BERA, 2018).

Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure credibility and rigour, the study employed multiple strategies. Triangulation across data types (documents, interviews, reflections) supported a richer and more trustworthy interpretation of findings. Member checking was carried out informally by sharing preliminary insights with selected participants, allowing them to verify accuracy and contribute further context. Thick description was used to convey the social and linguistic nuances of the consortium, facilitating transferability to similar cross-cultural educational projects (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail documenting analytic decisions, data sources, and coding iterations. This systematic approach enhances transparency and allows

others to follow the interpretive process. Reflexive memos were also maintained throughout the analysis to capture evolving thoughts and theoretical insights.

Limitations

As a qualitative case study, the findings are context-specific and not intended for broad generalisation. The study focused primarily on documentation and participant perspectives from the BRECIL consortium; therefore, its insights should be interpreted as illustrative rather than definitive. Furthermore, the reliance on English-language materials may have limited access to some local-level communication in Lao or Malay. Nevertheless, the inclusion of diverse data types and the triangulated design provide a strong foundation for understanding how multilingual communication mediates capacity building in transnational higher education partnerships.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings according to the study's three guiding questions:

1. How did the project build institutional and individual research capacity?
2. What language and communication barriers constrained collaboration?
3. Which strategies supported effective knowledge exchange?

A cross-cutting theme, linguistic diversity as a resource, is discussed as an emerging dimension that reshaped the consortium's understanding of collaboration.

Building Institutional and Individual Research Capacity

The BRECIL project strengthened both institutional structures and individual competencies in research across the participating universities. Thematic analysis of project documents and interviews revealed three main mechanisms: (i) structured training and mentoring, (ii) digitalisation of research processes, and (iii) enhancement of institutional support systems.

Structured Training and Mentoring

BRECIL's training workshops focused on key areas such as academic writing, ethics, research methodology, and digital data management. Participants from Laos and Malaysia particularly valued mentoring sessions led by European partners, which provided exposure to international research norms and publishing practices. One Lao participant noted:

"Before BRECIL, research writing was something distant for us. We learned how to structure a paper, how to respond to reviewers. It built our confidence and gave us a sense that we could also publish internationally." *(Lao lecturer, Interview 3)*

Mentorship functioned as both skill transfer and identity development. European trainers emphasized collaborative reflection rather than one-way instruction, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist principle that learning occurs through guided participation. Over time, mentees internalized new academic practices, and several institutions reported an increase in research proposals and publications by project completion (BRECIL Report, 2021).

Digitalisation of Research Processes

Digital capacity-building workshops facilitated by European partners introduced new data collection and management tools. These interventions not only modernized administrative

systems but also supported remote collaboration—a vital adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a Malaysian project coordinator commented:

"The move to online research management was a big step. It made our reporting more transparent, and it allowed us to connect with our Lao partners more frequently. We learned new ways to sustain collaboration even when borders were closed." *(Coordinator, Malaysia, Interview 4)*

The introduction of digital tools thus catalyzed a shift from project-based cooperation to more sustained institutional partnerships, a finding consistent with recent studies on Erasmus+ project sustainability (Tran & Nguyen, 2022).

Institutional Support and Research Culture

The project's influence extended beyond individuals to institutional reform. Documents indicated that several universities established internal research committees or policy frameworks for ethics review. In Laos, for instance, BRECIL provided templates for research proposals and structured peer review, which were later adopted across faculties. The consolidation of such structures demonstrates how capacity building became institutionalized, echoing Knight's (2020) view that sustainable internationalisation depends on embedding practices within governance systems.

Overall, BRECIL's approach reflects constructivist and participatory learning principles: capacity was not delivered but co-created. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) concept of *communities of practice*, where collective participation fosters both competence and belonging.

Communication Barriers in Multilingual Collaboration

Despite these achievements, participants frequently cited language and communication challenges as significant obstacles to smooth collaboration. These barriers occurred at multiple levels, namely, linguistic, intercultural, and technological.

English Proficiency and Linguistic Confidence

English served as the lingua franca, but varying levels of proficiency influenced participation. Lao and Malaysian partners often reported anxiety during formal meetings or while drafting documents. One Lao academic explained:

"When we had to present in English, I was stressed. I felt nervous. Sometimes, yes we do understood the content, but it was hard to express ideas so fast, it looks like so much time everybody is looking at you, waiting to listen what you are going to say, especially online." *(Lao participant, Interview 5)*

This sentiment resonates with Flowerdew's (2019) discussion of linguistic inequality in global academic publishing, where non-native speakers face additional cognitive load and affective barriers. European partners acknowledged this asymmetry but also viewed it as an opportunity for empathy and adaptation:

"We learned to slow down, to rephrase. It was not just about teaching research—it was about listening and understanding across accents and levels. Needed to listen very carefully and requires a extra attention " *(European trainer, Interview 2)*

Such mutual adjustment reflects Jenkins's (2015) notion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), where communication success depends less on grammatical accuracy than on pragmatic accommodation and shared understanding.

Intercultural Communication and Hierarchical Norms

Cultural expectations regarding hierarchy and communication also influenced interactions. Participants from Southeast Asia tended to defer to European counterparts in decision-making or academic debates. One Malaysian partner described:

"Sometimes we hesitated before disagreeing because we didn't want to look impolite. But later, slowly, slowly as we became more confident, we began to feel more at ease, more confident." *(Malaysian participant, Interview 8)*

This gradual shift toward egalitarian dialogue illustrates the development of trust within the consortium. Drawing on Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions, the movement from high- to lower-power distance interactions signaled growing intercultural competence—a key indicator of capacity building (Deardorff, 2016).

Technological and Temporal Barriers

Communication was further complicated by digital connectivity issues and time-zone differences. Meeting minutes showed that delays sometimes occurred due to unstable internet access in Lao PDR. However, these logistical barriers indirectly encouraged the use of asynchronous tools, such as shared folders and email summaries, that improved documentation and transparency.

As one European partner reflected:

"We started asking our counterparts to be ready for bilingual summaries and materials strong on visuals, so that they could be understood. It slowed things down but improved clarity. One important document was bilingual, and had the full support (of BRECIL) " *(European partner, Interview 10)*

The adaptation of digital communication modes echoes Mauranen's (2012) observation that online academic interaction often promotes reflective and negotiated meaning-making, particularly in multilingual teams.

Strategies for Effective Knowledge Exchange

Participants and documents identified several strategies that successfully mitigated communication barriers and fostered mutual learning.

Writing Workshops and Mentoring

Writing workshops emerged as a central mechanism for capacity building. They combined explicit instruction on academic genres with collaborative writing exercises, allowing participants to learn through doing. Reflective notes from the final workshop reveal that participants found peer feedback invaluable:

"When there was review, review document drafts, it was so much easier to learn. The European mentors were giving help in editing, correcting, they explained why it is better to write in a certain way. Why sometimes it is important to do the writing correctly, otherwise the meaning is wrong." *(Lao researcher, Workshop Reflection)*

This aligns with the scaffolding principle in sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000), where knowledge is constructed through guided practice within a supportive environment.

Translanguaging and Code-Switching

BRECIL participants often switched between English and local languages during informal discussions, particularly in regional workshops. Far from being a sign of confusion, this translanguaging practice served pragmatic and affective functions—it clarified complex ideas, reduced anxiety, and enhanced inclusivity. A Malaysian trainer explained:

"Sometimes after a heavy English discussion, important matters. we'd summarize important points in Lao among ourselves. This was helpful for many of us, then we'd share the main points in English." *(Malaysian trainer, Interview 9)*

This practice exemplifies Canagarajah's (2013) concept of translingual negotiation, where multilingual speakers strategically draw on their entire linguistic repertoires to achieve understanding. Translanguaging thus became a pedagogical and communicative resource, enriching rather than undermining collaboration.

Structured Reflection and Feedback Loops

The consortium institutionalized reflection through post-activity reports and internal evaluations. These feedback loops encouraged critical dialogue about communication practices and project progress. One project manager commented:

"We didn't stop at reporting results; we always discuss what works, what doesn't, and what are the key issues. That openness made us a learning community." *(European coordinator, Interview 11)*

This reflexive orientation transformed BRECIL from a compliance-driven initiative into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where continuous learning and adaptation were normalized.

Linguistic Diversity as a Resource

Initially perceived as a barrier, linguistic diversity gradually emerged as a resource for creativity, empathy, and innovation. Over time, consortium members recognized that multilingual exchanges allowed for richer interpretations of concepts and fostered a sense of shared ownership.

One Lao lecturer reflected:

"We started realizing that our way of explaining things in Lao sometimes show something different, slightly different meaning, or sometimes following our local style which has more specific meaning. Our European partners began asking us how we see certain ideas from our culture. There could be words that are understood a bit differntly" *(Lao participant, Interview 6)*

Such interactions reflect Holliday's (2018) argument that intercultural communication should be viewed as *dialogic*, where meaning is co-constructed through negotiation rather than imposed through linguistic hierarchy. By valuing different epistemological perspectives, the consortium demonstrated what Blommaert (2010) calls "linguistic equity", acknowledging multiple ways of knowing and expressing.

Moreover, linguistic plurality encouraged creative pedagogical design. During later workshops, facilitators began integrating examples in multiple languages or using comparative terminologies to clarify abstract research concepts. This multilingual pedagogy enhanced engagement and illustrated how applied linguistics principles can mediate disciplinary understanding in development-oriented projects.

In this way, linguistic diversity was reframed as a transformative asset—a driver of inclusion and innovation aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals' call for equitable access to knowledge (UNESCO, 2023). Rather than viewing English proficiency as the sole measure of capacity, BRECIL's experience suggests that linguistic adaptability and intercultural openness are equally critical dimensions of research competence in the Global South.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the findings affirm that research capacity building is inherently communicative. The BRECIL consortium advanced its goals not only through formal training but through everyday interactions that fostered trust, empathy, and shared learning. The findings reinforce three key insights:

1. Capacity building is dialogic. Institutional and individual growth emerged from sustained communication and mutual mentoring rather than top-down transfer.
2. Language mediates inclusion. Addressing linguistic asymmetries through translanguaging and reflective dialogue enhanced participation and equity.
3. Diversity generates innovation. Multilingualism enriched conceptual understanding and fostered creative pedagogical approaches.

These insights extend theoretical perspectives in applied linguistics by showing how social constructivism and communities of practice manifest within international development contexts. They also underscore the ethical imperative of linguistic justice in transnational higher education partnerships—ensuring that collaboration remains inclusive, reciprocal, and sustainable.

Conclusion

This study examined how the BRECIL Erasmus+ CBHE project strengthened research capacity across institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia while navigating the complexities of multilingual and intercultural communication. Through an integrated analysis of project documents, interviews, and participant reflections, it revealed how research capacity building is not only a technical or institutional process but also a linguistic and communicative endeavour. The study demonstrates that understanding, meaning, and collaboration in transnational higher education depend fundamentally on how partners use, interpret, and negotiate language across diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

Theoretical Contributions

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the intersection of applied linguistics, social constructionism, and capacity-building research. Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of social constructionism, it shows how research capacity is co-constructed through discourse, negotiation, and shared linguistic practices rather than merely transferred from one institution to another. Language thus becomes the medium through which knowledge, trust, and institutional norms are collectively shaped.

In alignment with intercultural communication theory (Byram, 1997; Holliday, 2018), the findings illustrate that effective collaboration in multilingual academic settings requires more than English proficiency—it involves the capacity to interpret meanings contextually and to accommodate communicative norms. The project participants' reflections showed that communication was an iterative process of clarification, reformulation, and mutual adjustment. Such interactions reflect what Kramsch (2009) terms *symbolic competence*: the ability to make

meaning through language that transcends grammar and vocabulary to engage cultural context and social intent.

This conceptual understanding enriches the growing body of work in linguistic ethnography and internationalisation of higher education (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Jenkins, 2015), offering a nuanced model of how research collaboration unfolds in multilingual partnerships. The theoretical contribution lies in situating language as both a driver and mediator of research capacity development—highlighting communication as an ethical and epistemic dimension of global collaboration.

Empirical Contributions

Empirically, the study contributes new insights into the mechanisms and micro-processes that underpin capacity building within the Erasmus+ framework. The evidence shows that initiatives such as writing workshops, mentoring schemes, and digital training effectively enhanced both institutional structures and individual competencies in Laos and Malaysia. Yet these outcomes were sustained and amplified only when accompanied by sustained linguistic support and culturally sensitive communication strategies.

The analysis also uncovered the importance of documentation as dialogue—project reports, emails, and evaluation forms were not merely administrative artefacts but communicative acts that shaped how knowledge was shared and institutionalised. Such documentary practices revealed the subtle ways through which multilingual negotiation occurred, enabling participants to reconcile differing expectations and epistemic traditions.

The findings also affirm that linguistic diversity can function as a resource rather than a barrier. Instances of translanguaging during workshops and meetings allowed participants to explain complex ideas more clearly, engage peers with limited English proficiency, and foster mutual learning. In this sense, linguistic diversity enhanced the inclusivity and authenticity of collaboration, transforming potential communication difficulties into opportunities for reflection and growth.

Policy and Practical Implications

At the policy level, the study offers actionable recommendations for future capacity-building programmes in multilingual and multicultural settings. First, integrating linguistic and intercultural training as part of project design can strengthen not only participants' research competence but also their communicative confidence. Capacity building should therefore include structured opportunities for reflective dialogue on language use, translation practices, and communicative norms.

Second, project management frameworks within Erasmus+ and similar schemes could explicitly recognise language and communication as indicators of institutional capacity. This shift would acknowledge that successful knowledge transfer depends not merely on material resources or technology but on the ability to communicate ideas effectively across linguistic boundaries.

Third, higher education policymakers in Southeast Asia can draw on the BRECIL experience to support sustainable research ecosystems that value multilingualism as a foundation for inclusion and innovation. Encouraging publications and workshops in both global and local languages can enhance accessibility and foster equitable participation in international research.

Alignment with MAALIC 2025: Sustainability, Inclusion, and Innovation

This study resonates strongly with the MAALIC 2025 theme, demonstrating that sustainability in applied linguistics and higher education partnerships arises from inclusive and innovative communication practices.

- Sustainability was achieved through the creation of long-term mentoring relationships, digital research tools, and institutional frameworks that continued beyond the project's funding period.
- Inclusion was fostered through multilingual engagement, which allowed all partners—regardless of English proficiency—to contribute meaningfully to research discussions and decision-making.
- Innovation emerged from the creative ways participants used language—through translanguaging, contextual explanation, and re-framing—to make research training locally relevant and globally connected.

In essence, BRECIL demonstrated that when communication is treated as a shared, reflexive, and inclusive process, multilingual collaboration becomes a driver of innovation and social transformation, not a logistical obstacle.

Concluding Reflections

Ultimately, this study underscores a simple but powerful insight: research capacity is communicative capacity. Sustainable international partnerships depend on how effectively people listen, interpret, and co-construct meaning across languages and cultures. As higher education continues to internationalise, recognising the centrality of language—written, spoken, and contextual—will be crucial to fostering equitable and impactful collaboration.

BRECIL's experience reminds us that the future of applied linguistics lies not only in analysing language, but in using it ethically, inclusively, and creatively to build communities of learning that transcend geographical borders.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the future design and evaluation of international capacity-building initiatives, particularly within multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Southeast Asia.

First, language and communication should be embedded as core dimensions of research capacity frameworks, rather than treated as peripheral support functions. Future Erasmus+ and ASEAN Higher Education projects could incorporate explicit "communication literacy" modules, including academic writing workshops, translanguaging strategies, and intercultural communication mentoring. This would align research development with linguistic empowerment, ensuring equitable participation across partner institutions.

Second, digital tools for multilingual collaboration deserve greater attention. AI-driven translation systems, collaborative platforms, and multimodal communication tools can reduce linguistic barriers, provided they are used ethically and reflexively. However, these tools must be complemented by human mediation—facilitated dialogue and linguistic accommodation—to preserve contextual nuance and cultural meaning.

Third, policy frameworks for international partnerships should explicitly recognise language as a component of institutional sustainability. Funding agencies could encourage projects to allocate resources for translation, editing, and language facilitation. Such recognition would

promote inclusivity and ensure that project outputs—publications, reports, or training materials—are accessible to all stakeholders, not only those fluent in English.

Fourth, future research could extend this study by comparing multilingual collaboration models across regions or disciplines. Cross-case analyses involving projects in Africa, South Asia, or Latin America could test the transferability of BRECIL's communication strategies and reveal context-specific dynamics of language use. Longitudinal studies might also explore how linguistic practices evolve after the completion of funding cycles, assessing whether inclusive communication contributes to sustained institutional growth.

Finally, applied linguistics scholars have an ongoing role in shaping the ethics and practice of transnational education. By integrating discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and critical pedagogy, future studies can continue to highlight how communication mediates power, knowledge, and inclusion in higher education.

In conclusion, fostering sustainable, inclusive, and innovative partnerships in global academia requires rethinking communication as infrastructure—a foundational element that holds together diverse epistemic communities. When language is recognised not just as a medium but as a mode of relationship and reflection, multilingual collaboration can flourish as a model for both social transformation and academic excellence.

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