Imposter Syndrome in the Classroom: What are the impacts on students' learning experiences and how can academic practice be improved?

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1. Introduction

Imposter syndrome is a prominent topic of conversation in academic spheres, and certainly within the field of sociology, alongside being fairly well known in popular culture. Research on this phenomenon primarily focuses on its presentation within the higher education system, being faced by students and academic staff alike.

Imposter syndrome has been defined in a number of ways, often according to the context in which it has been studied. For instance, Meadhbh Murray et al (2023: 749) define feelings of imposterism as 'a form of unevenly distributed emotional work', referring to the difficulties associated with feeling like a fraud in the academic environment. Breeze (2018) interprets recent perceptions of imposter syndrome as a 'public feeling', suggesting that it is a collective experience which incorporates various kinds of marginalisation within higher education and beyond. Alternatively, imposter syndrome is occasionally referred to as stemming from irrational feelings (Slank, 2019; Clance and Imes, 1978), perhaps implying that the phenomenon is a result of insecurities and anxieties about one's achievements.

Early discussions of imposter syndrome, such as Clance and Imes' (1978) *The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women*, depict this phenomenon as predominantly being experienced by women, or men displaying more 'feminine' traits, who feel a sense of 'phoniness' about their achievements, believing they are due to luck or being misgraded. However, more recent studies of imposter syndrome tend to take a much more intersectional approach than this, with Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022) emphasising the links between imposter syndrome and various kinds of structural inequality, such as gender, social class and ethnicity.

The implications that imposter syndrome poses for mental health have been discussed in several studies, with Meadhbh Murray et al (2023: 757) referring to the 'difficult emotional work' of dealing with imposterism, particularly when this involves navigating higher education with a marginalised identity. Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022) support this idea, observing the physical symptoms of imposter syndrome, such as panic attacks and breathlessness, alongside others.

Whilst early studies of imposter syndrome, most notably that by Clance and Imes (1978) depict it as an individual affliction suffered by certain women, this notion has been widely challenged by modern perspectives on imposter syndrome, arguing that this is more than just a psychological issue, and that higher education providers should take more responsibility for the situations and environments which lead to imposterism.

More recent discussions of imposter syndrome observe how linguistic factors can shape experiences of imposter syndrome in higher education. For instance, Addison and Mountford (2015) observe how certain ways of speaking are assigned more value within the university environment, which they describe as 'talking the talk'. It is understood that some accents are perceived as more intelligent than others, with regional accents often being viewed as having less value than RP speech (Lawler, 1999). Meadhbh Murray et al (2023) discuss how some members of higher education environments may engage in 'code-switching' (Rollock, 2014), which involves changing one's accent. This is likely a result of the fact that 35% of university students reported feeling self-conscious about their accent (The Sutton Trust, 2022). This links in with Honey's (1989) idea that changing one's accent requires a conscious effort, as this is something that we grow up speaking.

2. Research question and objectives

The overall theme of my research project is imposter syndrome in higher education, looking at how it can influence students' experiences of university, as well as what can be put in place to improve academic practices so that it can be mitigated. Whilst myriad factors may heighten imposter syndrome, my analysis of the data has indicated that linguistic factors, such as speaking with a regional accent or having English as an additional language, may trigger higher levels of imposter syndrome in the university environment, particularly in elite institutions such as Durham University, and so this report will question how linguistic factors can be a force of exclusion within the university environment, and the impacts that this can have on students.

3. Research design

The purpose of this report is to investigate the traits and impacts of imposter syndrome on university students, through the use of qualitative methods, in order to gain a better understanding of the emotional consequences of imposter syndrome. This report draws from a set of pre-existing interview transcripts, focusing on student experiences of imposter syndrome at Durham University. There were 9 transcripts in total in this set of secondary data, each taking a semi-structured interview format, with common questions including 'what does imposter syndrome look like to you?', as well as asking what needs to change at Durham University to reduce or mitigate imposter syndrome. All 9 interviewees were women, with 7 out of this group being PhD students, and 2 being undergraduates. 6 participants were identified as being international students, the others being from the UK. These transcripts were reviewed using thematic analysis techniques, as this method seemed more

intuitive for exploring patterns of imposter syndrome in a fully qualitative manner, as opposed to using content analysis. This analysis was undertaken with an inductive approach by devising a series of codes after reading the data. These codes were grouped into recurring themes across all 9 transcripts, which were used to identify common trends across various people's experiences of imposter syndrome. After assessing these codes and themes, it was made apparent that factors relating to language, for example regional accents and native languages, had a major influence on experiences of imposter syndrome for several participants, and so quotes and anecdotes relating to these topics were closely analysed as evidence for this report.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Imposter syndrome in the context of language

Imposter syndrome tends to occur in those who feel like an outsider in the setting they find themselves in; this can be the result of various factors which have the power to include and exclude people. For some, this can relate to linguistic factors that arise in social settings, which can create hierarchies between people. This may include the accent that somebody speaks with, or whether or not they speak English as their native language. The idea of language use placing people into certain levels of a hierarchy is explained by Bourdieu's (1992) concept of linguistic capital. This refers to the idea that certain forms of language are more highly valued in society, and can grant users access to more opportunities and resources. One student referred to this idea whilst recounting her experiences of university nightlife, commenting that:

> "The first term I remember like going to the club sounding really posh like Oh sorry, please can I get through? So people would let me through thinking they wouldn't let me through if I use my normal accent" (British undergraduate student)

Bourdieu also discusses how those who use more prestigious forms of language tend to hold more power in social settings, often dominating conversations, as well as being able to exclude those who do not conform to these standards. In the context of this research project, we can see how, in the setting of an elite higher education institution like Durham University, linguistic capital is deeply influential in interactions between students, with some students reporting that their regional accents meant those with higher linguistic capital would refuse to speak to them, as well as some non-native English speakers discussing how speaking English as an additional language meant that they reported constantly feeling behind their peers in social settings. The interview transcripts studied implied that these feelings of isolation often led to withdrawal from university life; this phenomenon was elaborated upon by Abraham and Ingram (2013), who discuss how these students would often mask their identities in order to better fit into these environments. For instance, one student reported that:

> "I just feel I need to wear a mask, a different kind of mask depending on the situation, depending on the role and playing. I just cannot be myself in many situations…" (international PhD student)

This demonstrates the student's fears that being herself in the academic environment could have negative consequences on people's perceptions of her, as well as her own success.

4.2 Imposter syndrome for speakers of English as an additional language

4.2.1 International students feeling behind their peers (academic)

This next section of the report will focus on the experiences of speakers of English as an additional language, as identified through analysis of the interview transcripts. Through thematic analysis of this data, it was found that several of these students felt that they were behind their fellow students due to their language abilities, despite passing the necessary requirements to study at Durham. For instance, one student answered that:

> "I'm not a native language speaker… so there's a lot of catching up" (international PhD student)

This identifies that non-native English speakers like herself faced additional challenges when completing their studies. This theme of 'catching up' was later touched upon by the same student, implying that this was a prominent concern for her, by saying that:

> "If you're an international student, it's a lot of catching up in just assuming that you know how assessments go, you know how to speak and write English in a certain way". (international PhD student)

This insight not only touches upon the required level of spoken English for international students, but alludes to the nuances of the expected dialect within higher education. We can link this back to Bourdieu's (1992) discussion of linguistic capital, which covers the expectation for people to speak in a certain way in order to gain prestige. Another student observed that:

> "It was hard for me to put it in words" (international PhD student)

This specific quote refers to her written work as part of her PhD course, suggesting that whilst she was capable of understanding the necessary concepts and ideas as part of her studies, she had difficulties when selecting and applying the expected academic vocabulary.

4.2.2 International students struggling to 'catch up' in social situations

The students interviewed also indicated a sense of feeling behind in the social sense, needing to catch up with their peers. One of the interviewees commented that:

> "Even though Chinese students are qualified… in terms of language to study in a UK university, it doesn't mean they have confidence in communication in speaking

> English, in using English to solve their problems, especially mental problems or problems in relation to imposter syndrome." (international PhD student, Chinese)

This provides a particularly useful insight into imposter syndrome, given that this participant acknowledges that students like them are appropriately qualified to study at a highly-regarded university, but may struggle to feel included due to gaps in their language abilities. The student also explicitly identifies imposter syndrome as a common result of these feelings, discussing how not being a native English speaker can make accessing support difficult. This could indicate a need for universities like Durham to provide specialist support to students in these situations, or at least to provide additional training to existing support services, in order to become more accessible to international students.

4.2.3 Vernacular forms unique to the university environment

It was also found that, even for international students who spoke English as their first language, the unique vernacular forms found within university social circles were a source of confusion. One student reflected that:

> "Even when it comes down to slang and stuff I feel like I'm almost behind in conversation, especially at the beginning." (international undergraduate student, Canadian)

This student also referred to feelings of 'culture shock' as a result of this, a term which was used by several of the students interviewed. These students identified their own culture shock as stemming from various instances, such as Durham University being so different to their undergraduate university, recalling that:

> "It was very bizarre because I've never really had to deal with posh people" (international PhD student, Danish)

4.2.4 Difficulties in accessing support services

On observation of the heightened experiences of imposter syndrome for non-native English speakers, it was therefore concerning to find that some students found support services inaccessible, due to a lack of confidence in their English abilities outside the academic environment. One student, discussing her friend, noted that:

> "No, no, I don't want to speak English with them. If they if they say something that I do not understand, I will feel really embarrassed" (international PhD student, Chinese)

This highlights how, for some, reaching out to support services can be an anxiety-inducing experience, and could suggest that these services should strive to become more accessible to those who do not speak English as their first language.

4.3 Imposter syndrome due to having a regional accent

4.3.1 Lack of representation of Northern accents

Upon analysis of the interview transcripts, one student offered a particularly interesting account of her experiences as a student from the north of England, and how this aspect of her identity shaped her interactions with her fellow students. One characteristic of university life noted from this interview was the lack of representation of northern accents across the student body. The student reflected that, in her first week at university:

> "Everyone I spoke to had the RP accent." (British undergraduate student)

This seems to imply a lack of regional diversity in certain colleges at Durham University, with the student reporting that, after eventually meeting a student from a nearby city to her hometown, she felt that:

> "It shouldn't be that much of a massive thing to hear someone with a sort of similar accent around." (British undergraduate student)

The student discussed finding familiarity and comfort in interacting with other students with similar accents, reporting feelings of being "at home" in these situations, implying a sense of imposterism in settings where her accent was a minority.

4.3.2 Stigma against Northern accents

Similarly, his student reflected on her experiences of her accent being stigmatised, leading to feelings of imposterism:

> "My accent was considered really posh and people were like Oh [redacted] your accent's really posh. Then I came here in freshers and people were like Nice to meet you, what course you doing? And then I'd speak and they'd just turn around. I didn't realise it was like that. I think Durham just in general is a bit of a shock" (British undergraduate student)

Here, she discusses how other students would refuse to speak to her due to her accent, something that she found particularly surprising as her accent was considered "really posh" by friends in her hometown. This indicates how her perception of her own identity shifted drastically on entering the university environment. She reflects on this again later on in the interview, recalling how:

> "You'd go to speak to somebody, they would hear your accent and they'd turn down the conversation really quickly or simply just turn around," (British undergraduate student)

This demonstrates how some students may use accents to assess each other's value and potential social status, as well as to make assumptions about other students' wealth or intelligence. This relates to Lawler's (1999) discussion of accent and identity, finding that

accent is a major aspect of social class identity, as well as being regularly used by some to make assumptions on intelligence, with some regional accents being perceived as less intelligent or valuable than others. Following on from university life, these preconceived notions can have a serious impact on career prospects, with The Sutton Trust (2022) finding that 41% of university students from the North of England were concerned that their accent would negatively impact their future success, compared to only 19% of those from the South of England.

4.3.3 Code-switching

Another interesting aspect of this interview was its discussion of code-switching, a concept defined by Elkins and Hanke (2018) as a way in which students can 'navigate the tensions' between their own social class, and the identities and values found within higher education environments. In other words, code-switching relates to the idea of masking one's identity in situations where speaking and behaving authentically may expose them as an imposter. The student interviewed uses the term 'code switching' to refer to her mimicking the typical accent of her fellow students, reflecting that she sounded "really posh", particularly in highly social environments like nightclubs. Rollock (2014) refers to various forms of code-switching, and how it not only involves changing one's accent, but could also include visible changes, such as dressing in a more professional manner.

4.4 How do these factors lead to imposter syndrome?

This analysis of the interview data highlights how various linguistic factors can shape interactions and social dynamics between students in the higher education environment. The inequalities generated or exacerbated by these interactions can trigger imposter syndrome for many, particularly those whose language forms have less prestige. For instance, speakers of English as a foreign language may experience imposterism due to feeling behind in conversations with native speakers, heightening a sense of 'not belonging'. These feelings may also be triggered by feeling isolated from one's peers or their environment, and the inaccessibility of certain support services which would help to manage this. On a similar note, imposter syndrome relating to accents can also stem from feelings of isolation, particularly for those whose accents are underrepresented in the university environment. This is particularly prominent for those being made to feel like an outsider as a result of accent-based discrimination.

5. Conclusion

On analysis of the findings of this report, it is apparent that spoken language plays a significant role in feelings of inclusion for students in higher education, particularly in the forms of regional accents and native languages.

This report has acknowledged how facing imposter syndrome can pose further detrimental impacts on students' well-being. It can lead to feelings of isolation from university life,

including withdrawal from social events, or feeling a need to change oneself in order to be accepted in these situations.

It is therefore important that we propose a number of measures that should be taken in order to manage and improve academic practice, in both Durham University and beyond, so that we can effectively mitigate and prevent imposter syndrome in student life. Firstly, university support services should be better informed about what imposter syndrome is, and how to help students facing it. These support services should also be given more adequate preparation to support international students facing these issues, who may find these services less accessible. It could be argued that academic departments play an important role in supporting students, and so one of their roles could be to connect students through support networks, linking them with student or staff mentors who have experienced similar situations. This acknowledges how imposter syndrome can also be faced by academic staff, who may also benefit from specialised support services. Arday et al (2022) emphasise the need for better mental health support for university staff, particularly those from ethnic minorities.

Overall, it seems that universities have an important role in preventing the occurrence of imposter syndrome, or at the very least mitigating it.

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