

English Proficiency as a Quality Signal in International Higher Education Marketing: A Conceptual Framework of Signal Credibility, Student Trust and Enrolment Intention

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Abstract

Purpose: International higher education is a market in which prospective students must commit substantial money, time and personal risk to a service whose quality they cannot inspect before purchase. Universities, particularly those offering English-medium instruction (EMI) outside the traditional Anglophone destinations, increasingly foreground English proficiency (of the institution, its staff and its graduates) in their marketing. This paper develops a conceptual framework explaining how, and under what conditions, English proficiency claims operate as quality signals that shape student trust and enrolment intention.

Design/methodology/approach: Following the theory synthesis and model-building approaches to conceptual research (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011), the paper integrates signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973), source credibility research (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Ohanian, 1990), the integrative model of organisational trust (Mayer et al., 1995) and the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) with scholarship on EMI, language ideology and international student choice.

Findings: The framework proposes that English proficiency functions as a costly, partially verifiable signal of unobservable academic quality, international connectedness and graduate employability. Its effect on enrolment intention is transmitted through two sequential mechanisms: perceived signal credibility and student trust (in its competence, integrity and benevolence dimensions). The strength of these paths depends on signal characteristics (clarity, consistency, cost and verifiability), signal source (institutional, third-party or peer) and receiver characteristics (students' own proficiency, language ideologies and prior international exposure). Ten propositions are advanced, including the counterintuitive claim that overstated proficiency signals, once disconfirmed, damage trust more than modest but accurate ones.

Originality/value: The paper is among the first to theorise language itself, rather than rankings, accreditation or brand, as a market signal in international higher education. It offers testable propositions for empirical researchers and practical guidance for admissions, marketing and quality assurance teams, while recognising the ethical tensions created by native-speakerism and the commodification of English.

Keywords: English proficiency; signalling theory; signal credibility; student trust; enrolment intention; English-medium instruction; international higher education marketing

Paper type: Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The international student market has become one of the most competitive arenas in contemporary higher education. Driven by revenue pressures, reputational ambitions and national knowledge economy strategies, universities now compete for globally mobile students across borders, languages and regulatory regimes (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2006). This competition has made marketing, branding and recruitment central institutional functions rather than peripheral administrative activities (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). National governments have joined the effort: the United Kingdom, for example, has constructed a collective higher education brand that promises international students forms of cultural, social and economic capital convertible into positional advantage (Lomer et al., 2018).

Within this marketised landscape, the English language occupies a peculiar and powerful position. For institutions in the traditional Anglophone destinations, English is often an implicit selling point, assumed rather than argued. For universities elsewhere, the rapid expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) has turned English into an explicit element of the value proposition (Dearden, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018). Institutions in continental Europe, East Asia, the Middle East and South Asia increasingly advertise English-taught programmes, internationally recruited faculty and the communicative competence of their graduates as evidence that they offer a world-class education (Galloway et al., 2020; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Kirkpatrick (2011) has gone so far as to ask whether internationalisation in many such settings has in practice become "Englishisation".

The central argument of this paper is that English proficiency, as communicated in institutional marketing, functions as a *quality signal*. Higher education is a credence good: its quality is difficult to assess before enrolment and, in some respects, even after graduation (Ghosh et al., 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Prospective international students face pronounced information asymmetry. They are often geographically distant, unfamiliar with the host system and dependent on mediated information from websites, agents, rankings and social media (Le et al., 2019). Under such conditions, signalling theory predicts that buyers will rely on observable cues that correlate with unobservable quality (Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Spence, 1973). English proficiency, displayed through the language of instruction, staff credentials, programme materials, admissions requirements and graduate outcomes, is precisely such a cue.

Yet the literature has not theorised English proficiency in these terms. Research on international student choice has identified language as one "pull" factor among many (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), but has treated it largely as a practical requirement or a destination attribute rather than as a signal that carries inferential meaning about quality. Research on EMI has richly documented policy rationales, implementation challenges and stakeholder perceptions (Byun et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2014; Macaro et al., 2018), but has rarely connected these to marketing theory or to consumer decision processes. Research on trust in higher education has examined antecedents such as service quality, image and shared values (Carvalho & Mota, 2010; Schlesinger et al., 2017), but has not considered language as a source of trust. Meanwhile, social psychological work shows that language and accent shape judgements of credibility in ways that are neither neutral nor always rational (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010), raising questions that marketing scholarship has yet to address.

This paper responds to these gaps by asking three questions:

1. Through what mechanisms does English proficiency, communicated in international higher education marketing, influence prospective students' enrolment intention?
2. What characteristics of the signal, its source and its receiver determine whether English proficiency claims are perceived as credible?
3. Under what conditions might English proficiency signals undermine, rather than build, student trust?

In answering these questions, the paper makes three contributions. First, it extends signalling theory into the domain of language, conceptualising English proficiency as a multidimensional signal with distinct institutional, staff, programme and graduate referents. Second, it specifies a sequential mediating mechanism, from signal credibility to student trust to enrolment intention, that links signalling theory with the trust and relationship marketing literatures (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Third, it identifies boundary conditions, including students' own proficiency and their language ideologies, that help explain heterogeneity in how students respond to language-based marketing. The paper also engages critically with the ethical implications of such marketing, acknowledging that proficiency signals can reproduce native-speakerist hierarchies (Jenkins, 2014; Phillipson, 1992).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 sets out the theoretical foundations. Section 3 reviews the role of English proficiency in international higher education. Section 4 presents the conceptual framework and its propositions. Section 5 discusses theoretical and managerial implications, and Section 6 considers limitations, directions for future research and concluding reflections.

2. Theoretical foundations

This paper adopts a theory synthesis design (Jaakkola, 2020), integrating four bodies of theory that each explain one link in the chain from marketing communication to enrolment behaviour. Signalling theory explains why students attend to English proficiency cues; source credibility theory explains when those cues are believed; trust theory explains how believed cues translate into a willingness to accept vulnerability; and the theory of planned behaviour explains how trust feeds into enrolment intention. Table 1 summarises the role each theory plays.

Table 1. Theoretical lenses and their role in the framework

Theory	Core idea	Role in the framework	Key sources
Signalling theory	Under information asymmetry, informed parties send observable cues about unobservable quality	Explains why English proficiency is used and read as a quality cue	Spence (1973); Connelly et al. (2011); Kirmani & Rao (2000)
Source and brand credibility	Signals persuade only when their sender is seen as expert and trustworthy	Explains the transition from signal to belief	Hovland & Weiss (1951); Ohanian (1990); Erdem & Swait (1998, 2004)
Organisational trust	Trust is a willingness to be vulnerable based on perceived ability, integrity and benevolence	Explains how credible signals reduce perceived risk	Mayer et al. (1995); Morgan & Hunt (1994); Ghosh et al. (2001)
Theory of planned behaviour	Intention follows attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control	Explains the outcome and the role of the student's own capability	Ajzen (1991)

2.1 Signalling theory and the problem of unobservable quality

Signalling theory originates in Spence's (1973) analysis of labour markets, in which employers cannot directly observe a candidate's productivity and therefore rely on education as a signal. The theory rests on Akerlof's (1970) insight that information asymmetry can cause markets to fail, because buyers who cannot distinguish quality will discount all offerings, driving high-quality sellers out. Signals solve this problem when they are observable and when they are more costly for low-quality senders to produce than for high-quality senders, so that only genuinely high-quality senders find it worthwhile to send them (Connelly et al., 2011).

In marketing, signalling theory has been used to explain how warranties, prices, advertising expenditure and brand names communicate unobservable product quality (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Kirmani & Rao, 2000). Erdem and Swait (1998) reconceptualised brand equity itself as a signalling phenomenon, arguing that brands are valuable because they credibly convey information about product positions and reduce consumers' perceived risk and information costs. Connelly et al. (2011) organise the theory around four elements: the *signaller*, who holds private information; the *signal*, characterised by its observability and cost; the *receiver*, who interprets the signal; and *feedback*, through which receivers' responses shape future signalling. Bergh et al. (2014) add that signals operate within an equilibrium in which credibility depends on the relationship between signal cost and the sender's true type.

Higher education is a strong candidate for signalling analysis. It is an experience and credence service, purchased infrequently, at high cost, with outcomes that unfold over years (Ghosh et al., 2001). International

students face additional asymmetries arising from distance, unfamiliarity with foreign systems and reliance on intermediaries (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Universities therefore signal quality through rankings, accreditation, research reputation, alumni outcomes and branding (Hazelkorn, 2015; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Rindova et al. (2005) show that organisational reputation itself has two dimensions, prominence and perceived quality, each built partly through signals sent to stakeholders. This paper argues that English proficiency belongs in this repertoire.

2.2 Source credibility and brand credibility

A signal persuades only if receivers believe it. Classic persuasion research established that communications from sources perceived as expert and trustworthy produce greater attitude change than identical messages from less credible sources (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Ohanian (1990) developed a widely used scale distinguishing expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness as dimensions of source credibility. In the brand domain, Erdem and Swait (2004) defined brand credibility as the believability of the product position information contained in a brand, comprising expertise (the ability to deliver what is promised) and trustworthiness (the willingness to do so). They showed that credibility increases the likelihood that a brand enters consumers' consideration sets and is chosen.

The elaboration likelihood model adds that credibility operates differently depending on how carefully receivers process information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Under low elaboration, credibility acts as a peripheral cue; under high elaboration, receivers scrutinise argument quality and evidence. The heuristic-systematic model similarly distinguishes heuristic reliance on cues such as source characteristics from systematic processing of message content (Chaiken, 1980). Because the choice of an overseas university is typically high in involvement, prospective international students may be expected to process proficiency claims systematically, at least at later decision stages, so that verifiability and consistency become critical to credibility.

2.3 Trust in higher education

Trust is central to relationship marketing. Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined trust as confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity and placed it, together with commitment, at the heart of successful relational exchange. Mayer et al. (1995) proposed an integrative model in which trust is the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another, based on the trustor's perceptions of the trustee's *ability*, *benevolence* and *integrity*. Doney and Cannon (1997) and Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) showed that trust reduces perceived risk and increases value perceptions and loyalty in buyer and seller relationships.

In higher education, Ghosh et al. (2001) defined student trust as the degree to which a student is willing to rely on the institution to act in the student's best interest and help achieve academic and career goals. Carvalho and Mota (2010), applying the trust, value and loyalty framework of Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002), showed that student trust is developed and then translated into perceived value and loyalty. Schlesinger et al. (2017) found that satisfaction, image and shared values build trust, which in turn sustains loyalty. Most of this work, however, examines trust among enrolled students or graduates. The framework developed here focuses on *pre-enrolment* trust, which must be formed largely on the basis of signals because direct experience is unavailable.

2.4 The theory of planned behaviour and enrolment intention

The theory of planned behaviour holds that behavioural intention is determined by attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). Enrolment intention, defined here as a prospective student's stated likelihood of applying to and enrolling at a given institution, is a widely used proximal outcome in higher education marketing research because actual enrolment is shaped by admissions decisions, visas and finance that lie outside the student's control. Trust is theorised here to shape enrolment intention chiefly through attitudes (by raising expected outcomes and lowering perceived risk), while the student's own English proficiency enters through perceived behavioural control, that is, the student's confidence in being able to succeed in an English-medium environment.

3. English proficiency in international higher education

3.1 English as a market asset

English has become the dominant language of international academic communication, research publication and transnational employment, and universities have responded by making it a strategic asset. Coleman (2006) identified a set of motives behind the spread of English-medium teaching in Europe, including internationalisation, student exchange, the preparation of graduates for global labour markets and, notably, the marketing of institutions to fee-paying international students. Wächter and Maiworm (2014) documented the sustained growth of English-taught programmes across European higher education. Dearden (2014) described EMI as a global phenomenon expanding faster than the evidence base needed to guide it, a conclusion reinforced by the systematic review of Macaro et al. (2018).

In East Asia, EMI has been actively promoted through national policy as a route to world-class status. Byun et al. (2011) showed that Korean universities adopted English-medium teaching partly in response to government incentives and ranking criteria. Galloway et al. (2020) found that in Chinese and Japanese universities, EMI was frequently conceptualised as synonymous with internationalisation, and that its rationales included attracting international students and raising institutional profile. Lomer et al. (2018) similarly showed that the UK national brand foregrounded the English language as part of the capital promised to international students. In each case, English is not merely a medium of instruction but a component of the institution's market offer.

From the student's perspective, English is valued as a form of capital. International student choice research has long identified the language of instruction, and the opportunity to improve English, as factors attracting students to particular destinations (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Cubillo et al. (2006) included personal improvement and career prospects among the main drivers of international students' decisions, both of which are bound up with language. Wilkins et al. (2012), studying students at international branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates, found that the opportunity to study in English and the perceived quality of a foreign degree were salient motivations.

3.2 English proficiency as a multidimensional construct in marketing

In marketing communications, "English proficiency" refers to several distinct things, each with a different referent. This paper distinguishes four:

1. **Institutional proficiency:** the extent to which the institution operates in English across teaching, administration, support services and communications.
2. **Staff proficiency:** the English language competence of academic and professional staff, often signalled through international recruitment, overseas doctorates or teaching certification.
3. **Programme proficiency standards:** entry and exit language requirements, including the minimum test scores demanded at admission and any language support provided during study.
4. **Graduate proficiency:** claims about the communicative competence and international employability of graduates.

These dimensions matter because they differ in observability and verifiability. Entry requirements are published and can be compared across institutions; staff proficiency is partially observable through profiles, open days and recorded lectures; graduate proficiency is largely a forward-looking promise. Signalling theory predicts that more verifiable dimensions should carry more weight when receivers process information carefully (Connelly et al., 2011).

3.3 The gap between rhetoric and reality

A substantial body of research suggests that English proficiency claims are not always matched by practice. Hu et al. (2014) found considerable distance between the rhetoric of EMI policy at a Chinese university and classroom realities, including limited proficiency among both lecturers and students. Byun et al. (2011) and Kim et al. (2017) reported that Korean students often perceived EMI courses as reducing content comprehension, and

that lecturers' English competence varied considerably. Macaro et al. (2018) concluded that evidence on whether EMI improves either language or content learning remains inconclusive.

In Anglophone destinations, debate has focused on whether admission thresholds are adequate. Murray (2016) argued that English language standards in higher education are inconsistently defined and applied, and Arkoudis et al. (2012) called for institutions to take responsibility for students' language development from entry to exit. Research on international student adjustment shows that language difficulties affect academic performance, social integration and wellbeing (Andrade, 2006; Sawir, 2005), and that self-reported English fluency predicts acculturative stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003). These findings matter for the present framework because they imply that proficiency signals can be disconfirmed once students arrive, with consequences for trust, satisfaction and word of mouth.

3.4 Language ideology and the credibility of speakers

The evaluation of English proficiency is not ideologically neutral. Phillipson (1992) analysed the global spread of English as linguistic imperialism, and Piller and Cho (2013) showed how the promotion of English in Korean higher education was intertwined with neoliberal competition. Jenkins (2014), in her study of English as a lingua franca in international universities, found that institutional policies and websites frequently privileged native-speaker norms, even though most communication in such settings occurs between non-native speakers. Rose and Galloway (2019) advocate a Global Englishes perspective that recognises the legitimacy of diverse varieties.

These ideologies shape how proficiency signals are received. Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) found that listeners judged trivia statements as less likely to be true when spoken with a heavy foreign accent, an effect they attributed to processing difficulty rather than prejudice alone. Gluszek and Dovidio (2010) reviewed evidence that non-native accents attract stigma and lower evaluations of competence. Rubin (1992) showed that undergraduates' judgements of a lecturer's accent, and even their comprehension, were influenced by the perceived ethnicity of the lecturer. Lippi-Green (2012) documented how accent becomes a basis for discrimination. For marketing, the implication is that students may infer quality from *who* speaks English and *how*, not only from what proficiency claims say, and that such inferences may reproduce native-speakerist hierarchies that are neither accurate nor fair.

4. Conceptual framework and propositions

4.1 Overview

The framework (Figure 1) theorises English proficiency as a signal sent by universities to prospective international students. The signal's effect on enrolment intention is transmitted sequentially through perceived signal credibility and student trust. Signal characteristics act as antecedents of credibility; signal source moderates how the signal is converted into credibility; and receiver and contextual boundary conditions moderate the later paths. A feedback loop captures how students' lived experience after enrolment, communicated through electronic word of mouth (eWOM), alters the credibility of future signals, consistent with the feedback element of signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011).

Credible proficiency signals build trust, which drives enrolment

Solid arrows: direct paths. Dashed arrows: moderation and feedback.

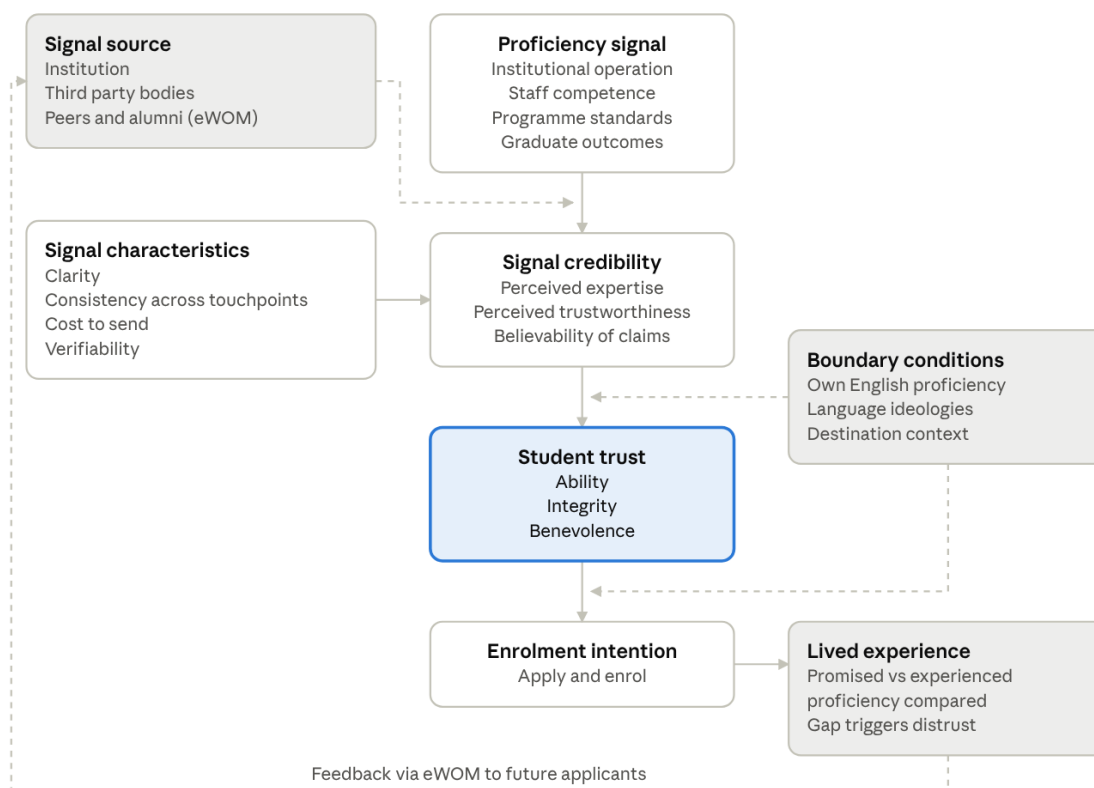


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of English proficiency signalling, signal credibility, student trust and enrolment intention

Read from top to bottom, the central column is the causal chain; boxes at the sides either feed it or condition its strength.

4.2 From proficiency signal to signal credibility

Signalling theory holds that a signal is informative when it is observable and when its cost differs between high- and low-quality senders (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). English proficiency claims vary sharply on both counts. A generic statement that an institution offers "a truly international English-speaking environment" is cheap to make and difficult to verify. A published minimum entry score, a list of staff with doctorates from English-medium universities, externally validated EMI teacher training or recorded sample lectures are more observable and more costly to fake. Kirmani and Rao (2000) note that signals become credible when sending a false signal would expose the sender to losses that outweigh the gains, for example through reputational damage or forgone revenue.

Verifiability is therefore expected to be a principal driver of credibility. Because the choice of an overseas university is a high-involvement decision, students are likely to scrutinise evidence rather than rely solely on peripheral cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), particularly at the shortlisting stage.

P1. English proficiency signals that are verifiable (for example, published entry thresholds, documented staff qualifications or independently audited EMI standards) will be perceived as more credible than unverifiable proficiency claims.

Consistency matters because international students encounter institutions across many touchpoints: websites, education agents, admissions correspondence, online interviews, virtual open days and social media. Erdem and

Swait (1998) argue that clarity and consistency over time are what allow brand signals to accumulate credibility. When the polished English of a marketing brochure contrasts with poorly drafted admissions emails or with an interviewer who struggles to communicate, the inconsistency itself becomes information, and students may infer that the brochure is not representative.

P2. Consistency of English proficiency signals across marketing and admissions touchpoints will be positively related to perceived signal credibility.

Signal cost is the third characteristic. Investments such as structured language support, staff language development, international faculty recruitment and, in particular, entry standards that require the institution to turn away fee-paying applicants are costly in ways that low-quality providers are unlikely to bear. In Spence's (1973) terms, such signals separate types. A university that publicises both demanding entry thresholds and substantial in-study language support also communicates willingness to absorb costs for the student's benefit.

P3. English proficiency signals that entail visible costs to the institution (such as forgone enrolments due to entry standards, or investment in language support) will be perceived as more credible than costless claims.

Signal source shapes credibility independently of content. Institutional communications are inherently self-interested, so students may discount them relative to rankings bodies, accreditors, government agencies or peers. Research on university choice shows that prospective students actively seek peer information on social media about teaching, reputation and student life (Le et al., 2019), and that social media interaction relates to recruitment performance (Rutter et al., 2016). Peer accounts are particularly diagnostic for experienced proficiency, such as whether lecturers can teach effectively in English, because they report precisely what institutional marketing cannot credibly self-report.

P4. The positive effect of English proficiency signals on perceived credibility will be stronger when the signal is corroborated by third-party or peer sources than when it originates solely from the institution.

4.3 From signal credibility to student trust

Credible information about a trustee's characteristics is the raw material of trust (Mayer et al., 1995). English proficiency signals map onto all three trust dimensions. Signals of staff and institutional proficiency speak to *ability*: the institution's competence to deliver an English-medium education of good quality. Accurate, transparent proficiency information, including candid statements about entry levels and what support is available, speaks to *integrity*. Signals of language support, preparatory programmes and attention to students' adjustment speak to *benevolence*, indicating that the institution cares about student success rather than merely recruitment. Because trust is defined by willingness to accept vulnerability (Mayer et al., 1995), and international students accept considerable vulnerability when they relocate, credible signals that reduce uncertainty are expected to raise trust.

P5. Perceived credibility of English proficiency signals will be positively related to pre-enrolment student trust in the institution, across its ability, integrity and benevolence dimensions.

4.4 From student trust to enrolment intention

Trust reduces perceived risk and raises expected value in relational exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). In higher education, trust has been linked to perceived value and loyalty (Carvalho & Mota, 2010; Schlesinger et al., 2017). In the pre-enrolment phase, trust is expected to raise favourable attitudes towards enrolling, which in turn strengthen intention (Ajzen, 1991). The framework positions trust as the mechanism through which credibility affects behaviour: credible signals matter not because they are believed in the abstract but because belief makes students willing to commit.

P6. Student trust will be positively related to enrolment intention and will mediate the relationship between perceived signal credibility and enrolment intention.

4.5 Boundary conditions

Students' own English proficiency. The theory of planned behaviour identifies perceived behavioural control as a determinant of intention (Ajzen, 1991). A prospective student who doubts her own English may trust an institution's high standards yet hesitate to enrol because she fears she will not cope; language difficulties are a documented source of academic and social strain (Andrade, 2006; Sawir, 2005; Yeh & Inose, 2003). For such students, benevolence signals (support, preparatory courses) are expected to carry more weight, while for highly proficient students ability signals (staff and graduate proficiency) should dominate.

P7. Students' self-assessed English proficiency will moderate the framework: for students with lower self-assessed proficiency, the effect of trust on enrolment intention will be weaker unless benevolence signals (such as language support) are present, whereas for students with higher proficiency, ability signals will exert a stronger effect on trust.

Language ideologies. Students' beliefs about what counts as good English influence how they read proficiency cues. Where students hold native-speakerist assumptions, they may treat native-speaker staff or Anglophone accents as markers of quality and discount competent speakers of other varieties (Jenkins, 2014; Rubin, 1992). Evidence that accented speech is judged less credible (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010) and that non-native accents carry stigma (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010) suggests that such ideologies distort credibility judgements independently of actual teaching competence.

P8. The strength of students' native-speakerist language ideologies will moderate the effect of staff proficiency signals on credibility, such that cues associated with native-speaker identity will be weighted more heavily, and cues from proficient non-native speakers discounted, among students with stronger native-speakerist beliefs.

Destination context. In traditional Anglophone destinations, English is a background attribute; proficiency claims carry little diagnostic value because they do not differentiate competitors. In non-Anglophone EMI settings, English cannot be assumed, and evidence of the rhetoric and reality gap is well documented (Hu et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2017). Here, proficiency signals are both more salient and more contested, so their credibility matters more.

P9. The effect of English proficiency signals on signal credibility and trust will be stronger for institutions in non-Anglophone EMI contexts than for institutions in Anglophone destinations.

4.6 Disconfirmation and the feedback loop

Signalling is not a single event. Once students enrol, they compare promised and experienced proficiency. Expectation disconfirmation theory holds that satisfaction depends on the gap between expectations and perceived performance (Oliver, 1980), and research across psychology shows that negative events weigh more heavily than equivalent positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). An institution that overstates its English environment may enjoy short-term gains in enrolment intention, but disconfirmation is likely to damage trust disproportionately, because it calls into question the integrity, not merely the ability, of the institution. Through eWOM, disappointed students then lower the credibility of the institution's signals for future applicants (Le et al., 2019), completing the feedback loop that Connelly et al. (2011) identify as integral to signalling equilibria.

P10. Negative disconfirmation of English proficiency signals after enrolment will reduce student trust more strongly than positive disconfirmation increases it, and will reduce the credibility of the institution's subsequent proficiency signals among prospective students through eWOM.

Table 2. Summary of propositions

No.	Path	Expected relationship
P1	Verifiability to credibility	Positive
P2	Cross-touchpoint consistency to credibility	Positive

No.	Path	Expected relationship
P3	Signal cost to credibility	Positive
P4	Third-party or peer corroboration as moderator of signal to credibility	Strengthens
P5	Credibility to student trust	Positive
P6	Trust to enrolment intention; trust as mediator	Positive; mediating
P7	Own proficiency as moderator of trust paths	Conditional on support signals
P8	Native-speakerist ideology as moderator of staff signals to credibility	Biases weighting
P9	Non-Anglophone EMI context as moderator	Strengthens
P10	Negative disconfirmation to trust and future credibility	Negative, asymmetric

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical implications

Extending signalling theory to language. Signalling research in marketing and management has focused on prices, warranties, advertising, certifications, board composition and similar organisational attributes (Connelly et al., 2011; Kirmani & Rao, 2000). This paper argues that language is itself a signal, one with unusual properties. Unlike a warranty, English proficiency is embodied: it is performed in every interaction between an institution and a prospective student, from a recruitment webinar to an offer letter. It is therefore continuously observable and continuously open to disconfirmation, which makes consistency (P2) and the feedback loop (P10) more central than in conventional signalling settings. The framework also shows that the same signal can have several referents (institution, staff, programme and graduates), each with different verifiability, a distinction that should be preserved in empirical work.

Linking signalling and trust. Signalling theory typically explains how receivers update beliefs about quality; trust theory explains how beliefs about a partner's ability, integrity and benevolence produce a willingness to accept vulnerability (Mayer et al., 1995). The framework connects the two through signal credibility, specifying that signals affect behaviour not directly but through a sequential credibility and trust mechanism (P5, P6). This responds to the observation that much trust research in higher education concerns enrolled students and graduates (Carvalho & Mota, 2010; Schlesinger et al., 2017), by theorising how trust is formed before any direct service experience, when signals are the main available evidence.

Bringing language ideology into marketing theory. Marketing models generally assume that receivers interpret signals according to their informational content. The literature on accent and language ideology suggests otherwise: credibility judgements can be shaped by processing fluency and by beliefs about legitimate speakers (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Jenkins, 2014). Proposition 8 introduces receiver ideology as a boundary condition, implying that a signalling equilibrium may reward institutions for displaying native-speaker identity rather than actual teaching competence. This is a substantive theoretical point: signals can be efficient in the economic sense yet inequitable and inaccurate as indicators of educational quality.

Contextualising international student choice. Push and pull models (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) list language as a destination factor. The framework reframes language as a dynamic, institution-level communicative act

whose effects depend on context (P9). This helps explain why English carries different meanings in an Anglophone market, where it is assumed, and in a non-Anglophone EMI market, where it must be demonstrated and where scepticism is warranted by evidence of implementation gaps (Hu et al., 2014; Macaro et al., 2018).

5.2 Managerial implications

The framework yields several practical recommendations for university marketing, admissions and quality assurance teams.

1. **Make proficiency claims verifiable.** Replace generic claims about an "international English environment" with evidence that prospective students can check: entry requirements, the proportion of modules taught in English, staff qualifications, EMI teacher training, sample recorded lectures and published graduate outcomes (P1).
2. **Audit consistency across touchpoints.** Proficiency is judged in every interaction. Admissions correspondence, agent briefings, interview panels and social media responses should meet the same standard as flagship marketing materials. Inconsistent quality is itself a negative signal (P2).
3. **Communicate costly commitments.** Visible investments such as language support centres, pre-sessional programmes and staff development, and demanding but transparent entry standards, separate committed institutions from opportunistic ones (P3). Framing these as benefits to students strengthens benevolence perceptions.
4. **Enable credible third-party and peer voices.** External EMI accreditation, government quality reviews and unscripted student ambassador content can corroborate institutional claims (P4). Universities should resist the temptation to curate peer content so heavily that it loses its independence and hence its credibility.
5. **Segment by students' own proficiency.** Messages emphasising staff excellence and graduate employability may attract confident speakers but deter less confident applicants. For the latter, emphasis on support and progression pathways can build perceived behavioural control as well as trust (P7).
6. **Avoid overstatement.** Because negative disconfirmation is likely to damage trust disproportionately and to spread through eWOM (P10), modest but accurate claims are a better long-term strategy than inflated ones. Marketing and academic quality assurance should therefore jointly own proficiency claims.

5.3 Ethical considerations

Language-based marketing raises ethical questions that institutions should confront. Promoting native-speaker staff as a marker of quality may be persuasive to some students (P8), but it reproduces the native-speakerist hierarchies that critical scholarship has long questioned (Jenkins, 2014; Phillipson, 1992; Rose & Galloway, 2019), and it may disadvantage highly qualified multilingual academics. It also conflicts with the reality of international campuses, where English is mainly used as a lingua franca among speakers of other languages. A more defensible approach is to signal *communicative and pedagogical competence*, for example through teaching qualifications and student evaluations, rather than speaker identity. Institutions should also recognise the commodification critique (Piller & Cho, 2013): presenting English primarily as a purchasable route to positional advantage may raise expectations that a degree cannot meet, increasing the risk of disconfirmation for students who invest heavily on that promise.

6. Limitations, future research and conclusion

6.1 Limitations

As a conceptual paper, this study does not test its propositions, and its value depends on subsequent empirical work (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; MacInnis, 2011). Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the framework focuses on English. Although English dominates international higher education, other languages, including Mandarin, French, German and Arabic, play significant roles in particular regional markets, and the logic of language signalling may operate differently there. Second, the framework treats enrolment intention as its outcome; intention is an imperfect proxy for behaviour, particularly where visas, finance and admissions decisions intervene. Third, the framework concentrates on the student as decision-maker, whereas families, sponsors, employers and education agents frequently shape international study choices and may interpret

proficiency signals differently. Fourth, it does not model the competitive dynamics through which institutions observe and imitate one another's signals, which could erode their separating power over time (Bergh et al., 2014).

6.2 Directions for future research

The propositions lend themselves to several research designs.

Experimental studies. Vignette or conjoint experiments could manipulate the verifiability, consistency, cost and source of proficiency signals in mock university web pages or recruitment emails, measuring effects on credibility, trust and intention (P1 to P4). Such designs provide strong causal inference and can isolate the effect of speaker accent or identity in recorded lecture samples (P8), building on experimental paradigms used by Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) and Rubin (1992).

Survey-based structural modelling. Cross-sectional surveys of prospective international students at the application stage could test the sequential mediation model (P5, P6) and its moderators (P7, P9) using structural equation modelling. Established scales are available as starting points: source credibility (Ohanian, 1990), brand credibility (Erdem & Swait, 2004) and student trust (Ghosh et al., 2001), adapted to the language context. Researchers should assess discriminant validity between credibility and trust (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and address common method variance through procedural and statistical remedies (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Longitudinal and multi-stage studies. Following cohorts from application through the first year of study would allow tests of the disconfirmation and feedback propositions (P10), and would reveal whether pre-enrolment trust built on proficiency signals persists, erodes or is rebuilt after arrival.

Comparative and qualitative studies. Comparative designs across Anglophone and non-Anglophone EMI destinations would test P9. Qualitative interviews and content analysis of peer discussions on social media (following Le et al., 2019) could uncover how students themselves construct the meaning of English proficiency, and whether Global Englishes perspectives (Rose & Galloway, 2019) are gaining ground among applicants.

Institutional analysis. Researchers could content-analyse university websites and recruitment materials to map which proficiency dimensions institutions emphasise, how verifiable their claims are, and how this varies by ranking position, country and ownership, connecting the framework to research on national and institutional branding (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Lomer et al., 2018).

6.3 Conclusion

International students choose universities under conditions of deep uncertainty, and English proficiency is one of the cues they use to see through it. This paper has argued that English proficiency, as communicated in higher education marketing, operates as a quality signal whose influence on enrolment intention depends on whether students find it credible and whether that credibility translates into trust. Drawing together signalling theory, source and brand credibility, organisational trust and the theory of planned behaviour, the framework specifies how signal characteristics and sources shape credibility, how credibility builds trust across ability, integrity and benevolence, and how students' own proficiency, their language ideologies and the destination context condition these effects. It also highlights a risk that is easily overlooked in competitive recruitment: proficiency claims are tested daily once students arrive, and overstatement may cost more trust than it ever gained. For institutions, the lesson is that the most persuasive English proficiency signal is ultimately an accurate one, supported by verifiable evidence and genuine investment in students' linguistic success. For researchers, the ten propositions offer a foundation for empirical work on a dimension of international higher education marketing that has so far received far less attention than its practical importance warrants.

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