Language and literacy skills of international and home students in UK higher education: How different are they, and why?

A) RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT
International students in UK higher education often experience lower academic success compared to British home students. One of the contributing factors to the differential attainment appears to be language: despite arriving with required language qualifications, EFL students know significantly fewer words, are much slower readers and understand less of what they read than British home students. Language difficulties, however, have been predominantly demonstrated on Chinese students, and it is unclear to what extent the language and academic difficulties of this population are representative of other international students, especially of those who come from typologically closer languages to English or who study with fewer fellow speakers of the same language. Understanding language difficulties of international students and what factors contribute to them is critical for developing appropriate support.

B) REFERENCES THAT SHOULD BE READ (NB if you do not have access to these, please email me)

C) RESEARCH AIMS / QUESTIONS
RQ1: How much do English language and literacy skills differ at university between international students who speak English as a foreign language (EFL) and home students who speak English as their first language?
RQ2: To what extent are these differences influenced by the EFL students’ first language? Do EFL students of the same general level of proficiency differ on indices of vocabulary size, speed of processing and higher literacy in English depending on the typological closeness of their first language to English?
RQ3: To what extent are these differences influenced by the number of fellow speakers of the same language with whom EFL students study?
RQ4: Do initial differences persist or disappear over the course of an academic year?
RQ5: How critical are language and literacy skills on arrival for academic success?

D) METHODS
The study will compare EFL university students in the UK and their British peers on a number of cognitive, language and literacy measures, including general intelligence, speed of processing in English, vocabulary size, reading comprehension and academic writing. The tests will be
administered at the beginning at the end of an academic year. Participants will be tested individually. Their performance will be compared via mixed-design ANOVAs, with time as a within-subject and group as a between-subject factor. Bivariate correlations and linear regression will be used to explore the effect of language and literacy measures at the point of entry on academic outcomes at the end of the year, expressed as participants’ credit-weighted average mark.