

‘They only do it to make our lives easier’

A look at attitudes towards the use and non-use of preferred names in the international classroom

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Photo used with the permission (and insistence) of my lovely students

My research started with a comment in the
tutor room

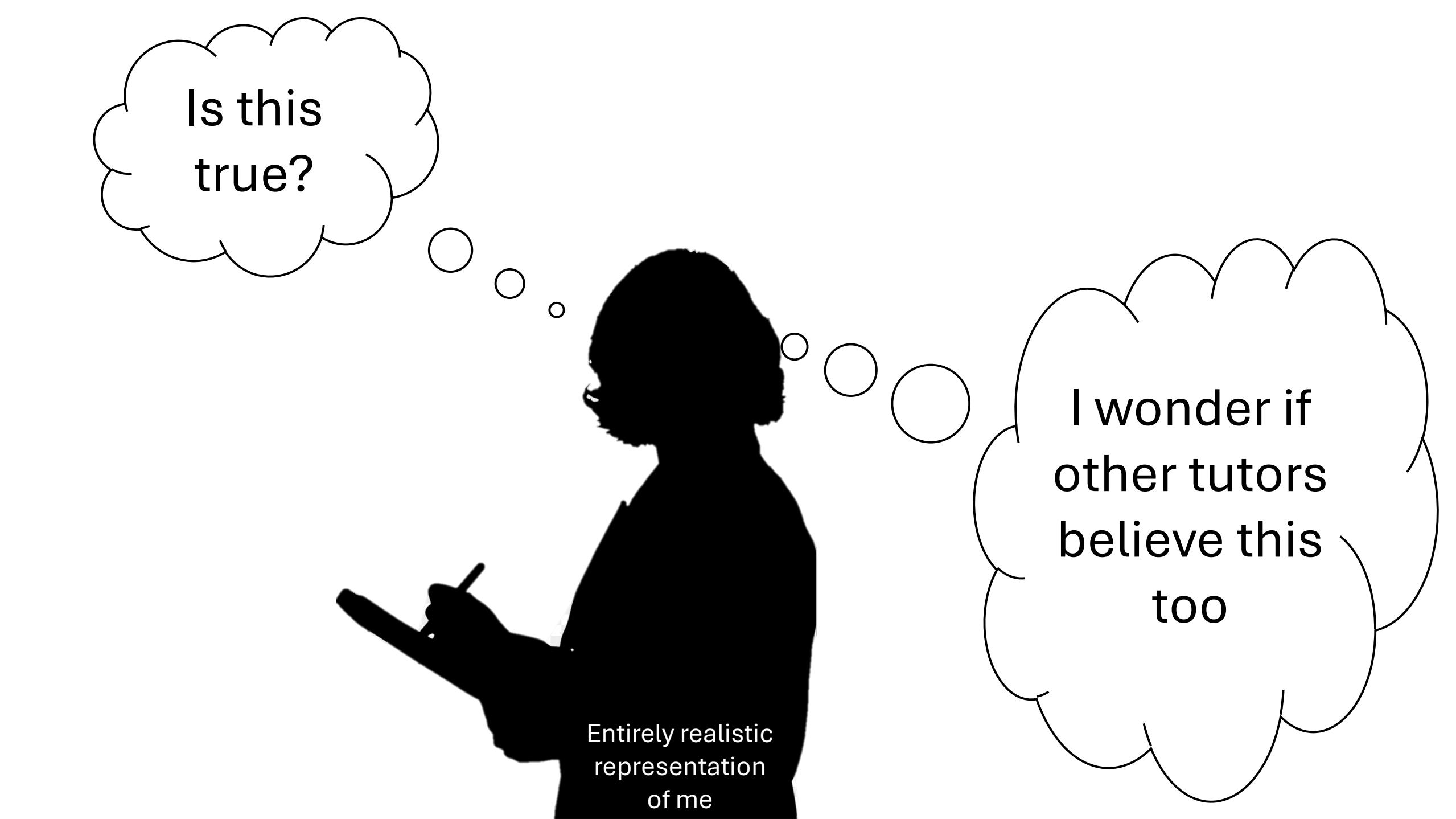
**Students only use
English names to make
our lives easier**

(unnamed colleague)

**Do we? That's
very nice of us**

(imaginary student)





Is this
true?

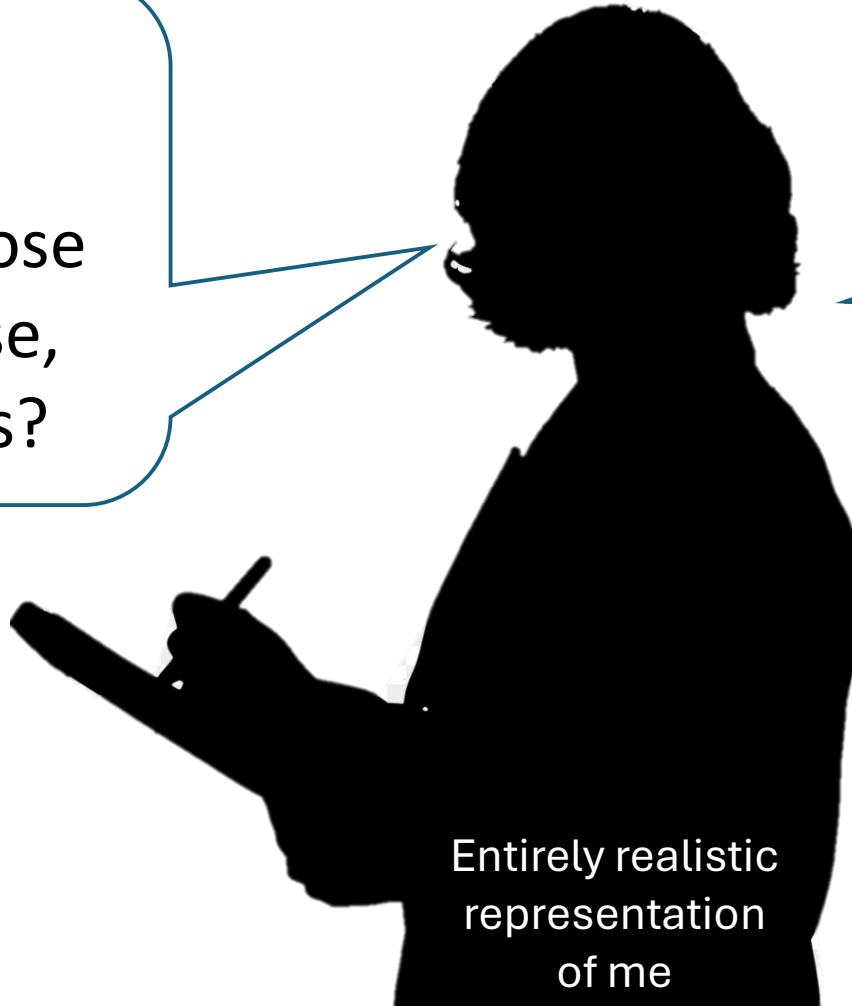
I wonder if
other tutors
believe this
too

Entirely realistic
representation
of me

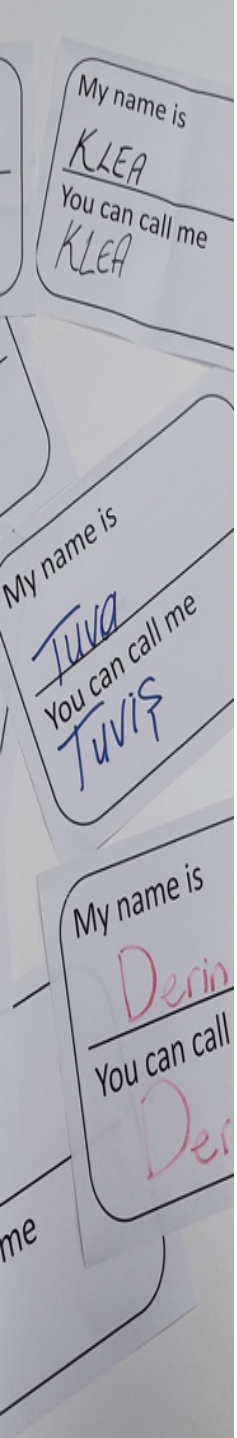
Serious research questions

1. Why do international students choose to use, or not use, preferred names?

2. What are tutor attitudes towards international students using preferred names?



Entirely realistic
representation
of me



Talking about names

- Had to define what I was talking about
- Didn't want to use 'nicknames' or 'English' names
- Settled on **preferred names** and **given names**
- This confused people who thought I was looking at gender identity
- Some people immediately assumed I was only interested in what our Chinese students were calling themselves: 'Helen, I haven't shared your questionnaire with my class as there aren't any Chinese students in it'

Slightly clunky definition I settled on and used when collecting data

For the purposes of this study, preferred name is used to refer to the name a person wishes to be known by which isn't the name on their official paperwork. This includes nicknames and chosen names. Given/official names are those on any official identity documents, such as passports. If you have officially changed your name for any reason, the name you officially changed it to is counted as a given/official name. This survey will not ask you if you have changed your given/official name or any reasons for name changes.

The Findings

Students' responses to whether they used a preferred name:



Yes 40%



**Yes, but I only use
it in the UK 16%**



No 44%

Student Survey Responses

- Most commonly mentioned reason for student use of a preferred name was **pronunciation**

“I would like to use my English name in English countries, and it may be easier for people to pronounce and remember”

“Sometimes asking people read Chinese name can be really hard, and I don’t want to suffer from any of those awkward situations. Preferred name could be better.”

- Other reasons include: feeling it makes it easier to connect with other people, being easier to remember and read, and preferring it because it suits them or sounds better.

“because it is for me really formal and when my tutor calls me by my nickname it for some reason builds a better relationship and learning experience..”

“my professors or friends can really easy to remember.”

“I think this name also fits me well.”

“I prefer XXXX.”

- A majority of preferred names were chosen by the students themselves, then a family member or English tutor

“I choose by myself. It sounds beautiful.”

“I chose my preferred name, Because it can bring a feeling of vitality to other.”

“My dad gave this English name when I was born. I don't know the reason.”

- Most students were asked what their preferred name was by tutors at King's
- Students were fairly accommodating when it came to how their name was pronounced by tutors

“my name is hard to pronounce, but they try their best, so I'm okay with that.”

“They sometimes pronounce my name wrong but it's okay.”

- Some students mentioned issues around not recognising their name when it was being pronounced by the tutors

“That makes me feel weird and anxious when they don't pronounce well, sometimes I'm not sure whether they call me.”

Tutor Survey Responses

- Most tutors asked students their preferred name- citing pronunciation, comfort, wanting to give the students agency as reasons why

“It seems more respectful, helps promote their sense of identity and agency, and supports a trusting student/tutor relationship.”

“To give them the option and be comfortable in the classroom.”

- Other tutors mentioned that students usually tell them or they expect the students to tell them if they had a preferred name

“They'd then usually tell me:
'You can call me ...'”

“I use the given name and expect them to tell me if they have a preferred one.”

- All tutors believed that it is important to use a student's preferred name

“It's an important first step in making an effort to 'see and hear' them for who they want to be 'seen and heard' as”

- Most tutors mentioned pronunciation as a reason why students might use a preferred name- Students' own sense of identity and name assigned by a teacher were also given as reasons

“Some may believe - perhaps correctly - (and there could be crossover) that tutors cannot pronounce their given name.”

“they identify with a slightly different version of themselves that might be recorded on a register.”

- Some tutors expressed some unease about students using preferred names rather than their given one

“I'm not a big fan of this practice since it seems more about catering to the needs of Western speakers than the students' own preferences”

“So, for Chinese students it may be that they have been given a nickname by a former teacher or chosen it themselves to give them a more Western sounding name. For these students, I really encourage them to use their Chinese name instead of a Western nickname.”

Conclusions and implications

- Students appreciate being asked for a preferred name, even those who use their given name
- Students in general recognise that the tutors are trying to be respectful and inclusive
- The reasons that students give for using a preferred name are more varied and complex than some tutors anticipated
- Tutors might need to revisit their own assumptions around why students use a preferred name
- Both tutors and students may benefit from an open discussion on the subject of names at the start of a new course

I am very pleased to see that fewer Chinese students are now using Western-style names and are tending much more to stick with their given Chinese name. This is really important and is connected to bringing their true identity to class and to intercultural communication, not least meaning that people from other countries need to learn the correct pronunciation

What AI thinks I look like when something is bothering me

I'm not a big fan of this practice since it seems more about catering to the needs of Western speakers than the students' own preferences

I encourage them to use their Chinese names

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I encourage them to use their **Chinese names**



In our eagerness to show our respect to our students' cultures, were we forgetting to give them a voice?

Thank you

Any questions?

Please contact me if you have anything you'd like to share or if you think you could share my surveys (especially the tutor one) at your institutions:

1. Contact me by email:
helen.m.eames@kcl.ac.uk
2. Or scan the QR code >>>>>

