

# **LEXICAL PERCEPTIONS AND DISCURSIVE REACTIONS TO THEMATIC CONSTRUCTS OF EUROPEAN STUDIES IN THE DIGITAL CONTEXT: A STUDENT-CENTERED LINGUISTIC SURVEY WITHIN THE ESPERIDTA PROJECT**

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As digital transformation reshapes higher education across Europe, the language used to describe interdisciplinary fields, such as European Studies, has become increasingly complex. Within this evolving landscape, student engagement with academic terminology plays a critical role in shaping motivation, understanding, and learning outcomes. This article explores how undergraduate students at VIZJA University (Warsaw, Poland) perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to five compound constructs central to the ESPERIDTA project: European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies, Digital Historical Developments, Digital European Law, Digital Management, and Digital Political Science. The study employed a student-centered linguistic approach, combining lexical perception analysis with discourse-oriented interpretation of qualitative responses. Over 100 students participated in surveys and open-ended reflections, offering paraphrases, emotional reactions, and commentaries on each phrase. The results reveal considerable variation in students' clarity and familiarity scores, with terminology perceived as bureaucratic or abstract often prompting confusion, rewording, or avoidance. Constructs grounded in specific disciplines (e.g., law, politics) were more easily understood than broader or less concrete terms, such as "European Languages Policies." Emotional responses ranged from curiosity and interest to skepticism and cognitive overload. The findings underscore the need for more reflexive and inclusive approaches to terminology in digital European Studies curricula. Educators and policymakers should consider the cognitive and affective dimensions of phrase construction, especially when integrating multilingual and digital frameworks. The study also highlights the value of engaging students as active participants in unpacking educational discourse, suggesting pathways for more accessible and resonant academic communication.

# ЛЕКСИЧНІ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ ТА ДИСКУРСИВНІ РЕАКЦІЇ НА ТЕМАТИЧНІ КОНСТРУКЦІЇ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКИХ СТУДІЙ У ЦИФРОВОМУ КОНТЕКСТІ: ЛІНГВІСТИЧНЕ ОПИТУВАННЯ СТУДЕНТІВ У МЕЖАХ ПРОЄКТУ ESPERIDTA

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**Ключові слова:** *студентське  
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Цифрова трансформація вищої освіти в Європі супроводжується ускладненням термінології, зокрема у міждисциплінарних галузях, таких як європейські студії. У цьому контексті сприйняття студентами академічної лексики відіграє важливу роль у формуванні мотивації, розуміння та навчальних результатів. У статті проаналізовано, як студенти бакалаврату Університету VIZJA (Варшава, Польща) інтерпретують і емоційно реагують на п'ять ключових складених словосполучень, пов'язаних із проєктом ESPERIDTA: European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies, Digital Historical Developments, Digital European Law, Digital Management та Digital Political Science. Дослідження базується на лінгвістичному підході, орієнтованому на студента, і поєднує аналіз лексичного сприйняття з дискурсивною інтерпретацією відкритих коментарів. Участь взяли понад 100 студентів, які надали свої переформулювання, емоційні оцінки та враження щодо кожного словосполучення. Результати показали значні відмінності у рівнях зрозумілості та знайомства з термінами. Найбільші труднощі виникали із загальними або абстрактними конструкціями, такими як “European Languages Policies”, тоді як дисциплінарно конкретизовані фрази (наприклад, у галузі права чи політики) викликали менше непорозумінь. Емоційні реакції варіювалися від зацікавлення до скепсису та когнітивного перевантаження. Отримані результати вказують на необхідність більш рефлексивного та інклюзивного підходу до термінології в цифрових курсах європейських студій. Важливо враховувати як когнітивні, так і емоційні аспекти сприйняття термінів. Активне залучення студентів до аналізу академічного дискурсу сприяє підвищенню ефективності навчання та розвитку мовної чутливості.

## 1. Introduction

The integration of digital tools and multilingual approaches into European higher education has brought about not only technological change but also a fundamental reconfiguration of the linguistic

landscape in which education, research, and policy communication occur. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of European Studies, where complex, compound phrases – often generated within institutional discourses – function as conceptual contain-

ers for interdisciplinary knowledge, policy agendas, and civic ideals. However, these terms are frequently characterized by high lexical density, ideological ambiguity, and low emotional transparency, particularly for undergraduate students engaging with such discourse for the first time.

This article emerges from the context of the ESPERIDTA project (European Studies for Supporting Polish Education and Research in Digital Transformation: Interdisciplinary Approach, Grant Agreement No. 101172710), which aims to support the modernization of European Studies in Polish higher education through digital innovation, multilingualism, and student-centered pedagogy. A central strand of the project involves examining how students interpret, emotionally respond to, and reframe complex terminological constructs that circulate within EU policy, academic curricula, and interdisciplinary teaching materials. This includes compound phrases such as: European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies, European Studies through Digital Historical Developments, European Studies through Digital European Law, European Studies through Digital Management, European Studies through Digital Political Science.

Such expressions are intended to reflect cutting-edge, integrative pedagogical approaches. However, from a linguistic and cognitive perspective, they also represent potential obstacles to student engagement and comprehension. Students may encounter these constructs not as transparent labels but as unfamiliar and ideologically charged formulations that require interpretation, emotional negotiation, and discursive adaptation.

In this context, terminology is more than vocabulary – it is a gatekeeper of meaning, identity, and belonging. As noted by Fairclough and Wodak [Wodak, Fairclough, 2010], the language used in European policy and education reflects institutional power structures and shapes how citizens (and students) perceive Europe. Moreover, in digital educational spaces, these terminologies are increasingly embedded in AI-driven platforms, multilingual repositories, and hybrid content delivery systems, further complicating their reception and understanding. For educators and policymakers, it is essential to understand how students react to these phrases: do they feel empowered, alienated, inspired, or confused?

This article focuses on *lexical perception* (how students cognitively process and interpret complex phrases), *emotional response* (what affective reactions such terms provoke), and *discursive behavior* (how students reformulate or comment on such language). Through a qualitative survey conducted within the ESPERIDTA project, we analyze how students perceive and respond to key thematic constructs of European Studies in the digital context. The study

builds on theoretical frameworks in cognitive linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and affective neurolinguistics, contributing to broader conversations about academic accessibility, digital transformation, and linguistic inclusivity in higher education.

By positioning student voice at the center of our inquiry, we aim to highlight the importance of reflexive and inclusive language in shaping European Studies curricula that resonate not only with institutional goals but also with the lived experiences and cognitive realities of learners navigating the digital multilingual age.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding how students perceive and emotionally react to complex thematic constructs in European Studies requires a multifaceted theoretical lens – one that combines insights from *critical discourse analysis*, *cognitive linguistics*, *affective neurolinguistics*, and *sociolinguistics* in education. These frameworks collectively enable the study to account not only for the semantic and syntactic dimensions of language but also for its ideological, emotional, and pedagogical effects.

*Critical discourse analysis* (CDA) serves as a foundational perspective for examining the ideological weight embedded in institutional terminology. According to Wodak and Fairclough [Wodak and Fairclough, 2010], the language of European education and policy does not merely reflect social reality – it constructs it. Within the framework of European integration, phrases such as “*European Studies through Digital Political Science*” or “*Digital European Language Policies*” function as more than descriptive labels; they are sites of ideological reproduction that convey assumptions about governance, identity, citizenship, and digital modernity. For students, especially those engaging with these constructs for the first time, the ideological density of such phrases may generate ambivalence, skepticism, or recontextualization.

CDA allows us to explore how students position themselves in relation to these phrases. Are they embraced as part of a shared European vision? Or are they viewed as opaque institutional jargon disconnected from student experience? By analyzing student comments and reformulations, we can trace how macro-level EU discourse is interpreted, reworked, or resisted at the micro-level of learner interaction.

*Cognitive linguistics* offers tools to understand how students mentally process the compound, multi-word expressions that dominate contemporary European educational discourse. Scholars such as Jackendoff and Audring [Jackendoff, Audring, 2020] emphasize that language is not stored as isolated words but as structured combinations of form and meaning – schemas that guide interpretation. Compound expressions like “*Digital European Law*” or

“*Digital Historical Developments*” activate conceptual frames that depend on prior knowledge, cross-linguistic transfer, and cultural familiarity.

From this perspective, lexical perception involves more than dictionary-based understanding; it requires the dynamic construction of meaning based on cognitive strategies such as metaphor extension, inferencing, and schema activation. When students encounter unfamiliar compound terminology, they may attempt to parse it by segmenting the expression, relating it to known frames (e.g., “*digital + history*”), or questioning its internal coherence. The survey data from ESPERIDTA participants show evidence of these processes in the form of paraphrasing, reframing, or even humor-based distancing – each of which reflects underlying cognitive mechanisms of interpretation.

While *cognitive models* explain how meaning is constructed, they must be complemented by affective neurolinguistics to capture the *emotional dynamics* of language processing. Research in this field [Hinojosa et al., 2020; Kissler & Koessler, 2011] shows that lexical items carry not only semantic content but also emotional valence, which influences attention, memory, and engagement. Importantly, studies indicate that emotional resonance is often *reduced in second-language academic contexts*, where institutional terminology can be perceived as detached or alienating.

This has significant implications for European Studies, where many students operate in multilingual, cross-cultural environments. If the language of instruction or curriculum feels ideologically distant or emotionally neutral, students may disengage. Conversely, emotionally salient or personally meaningful language may foster greater motivation and critical reflection. In the ESPERIDTA study, some students reacted to the thematic phrases with enthusiasm or intellectual curiosity. In contrast, others expressed confusion, skepticism, or even irony – responses that underscore the affective variability inherent in academic lexical encounters.

By applying affective neurolinguistic principles to student commentary, we gain insight into which constructs provoke engagement, which elicit resistance, and how emotion interacts with comprehension in multilingual educational settings.

The final strand of this framework emerges from *educational linguistics*, particularly in the context of *multilingual universities* and *student-centered curriculum design*. As Dafouz and Smit [Dafouz, Smit, 2016] argue, the language of instruction, assessment, and academic communication plays a crucial role in shaping students’ access to knowledge and participation. In English-medium or multilingual programs, terminology can become a “gatekeeper” that either invites participation or reinforces exclusion.

The ESPERIDTA project’s focus on digital transformation adds a layer of complexity. Students must navigate not only linguistic and disciplinary bounda-

ries but also technological and platform-based ones. This calls for a *reflexive pedagogical approach* – one that critically examines the language used in curricula, involves students in meaning-making, and supports translanguaging, reformulation, and emotional expression as valid educational practices.

Educational linguistics thus helps contextualize the observed lexical and emotional responses within broader questions of equity, access, and engagement in European higher education. It also informs policy-level recommendations, such as the development of inclusive, transparent, and adaptable terminology in EU-funded programs and digital platforms.

### 3. Research Objectives and Questions

This study operates at the intersection of linguistics, education, and digital transformation. Its primary aim is to investigate how undergraduate students **perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond** to complex thematic constructs related to European Studies in the context of digital education. These constructs, originating from the ESPERIDTA project’s interdisciplinary framework, serve as linguistic representations of broader EU educational and policy agendas. Understanding how students engage with such language is essential not only for curriculum design but also for refining the discourse of digital multilingualism in higher education.

To explore the lexical, emotional, and discursive responses of undergraduate students to compound thematic expressions in European Studies that integrate references to digital transformation, multilingual policy, and interdisciplinary domains.

The following specific objectives (SO) have been identified:

**O1:** To assess how students cognitively interpret compound institutional phrases such as “*European Studies through Digital Political Science*” or “*European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies*”.

**O2:** To identify emotional reactions (e.g., curiosity, confusion, resistance, enthusiasm) associated with such terminology.

**O3:** To analyze how students reframe, reword, or comment on the language used in these constructs.

**O4:** To evaluate how students perceive the accessibility, transparency, and relevance of EU educational terminology.

**O5:** To contribute to the design of student-centered, linguistically inclusive, and emotionally resonant discourse in European Studies education.

Based on the above objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions (RQ):

**RQ1:** How do undergraduate students interpret compound thematic expressions commonly used in digital European Studies discourse?

**RQ2:** What types of emotional responses do these expressions elicit, and how are these emotions expressed discursively?

**RQ3:** In what ways do students reword or critically engage with the institutional language of European Studies?

**RQ4:** What do these linguistic and emotional responses reveal about student engagement, inclusion, and comprehension in multilingual digital education?

**RQ5:** How can insights from these responses inform the development of more accessible and reflexive academic language in EU-supported curricula?

#### 4. Methodology

This study employs a *mixed-methods, student-centered linguistic survey design* to investigate how undergraduate students cognitively and emotionally engage with institutional terminology related to European Studies in a digital context. The methodology integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a multidimensional understanding of lexical perception, affective response, and discursive behavior.

The study was conducted within the framework of the ESPERIDTA project (*European Studies for Supporting Polish Education and Research in Digital Transformation: Interdisciplinary Approach*, Grant Agreement No. 101172710), which promotes interdisciplinary and multilingual European Studies through digitally enhanced teaching and research. One of the project's pedagogical pillars is the development of *student reflexivity in language*, particularly in relation to the discourse of EU institutions and academic programs.

A total of **58 undergraduate students** participated in the survey. All were enrolled in BA programs at the School of Humanities and Fine Arts and the School of Social Sciences at VIZJA University (Warsaw, Poland). The sample included students specializing in linguistics, European Studies, political science, communication, and cultural studies:

Gender distribution: 75.9% female, 24.1% male

Age range: 18–25 years (96%), 26+ (4%)

Language proficiency: All participants had upper-intermediate to advanced English (CEFR B2–C1), as the survey and all constructs were presented in English.

Participants were asked to respond to the following five compound thematic constructs developed within the ESPERIDTA pedagogical framework: *European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies*, *European Studies through Digital Historical Developments*, *European Studies through Digital European Law*, *European Studies through Digital Management*, *European Studies through Digital Political Science*

These expressions were selected due to their prevalence in institutional communication and interdisciplinary syllabi, as they reflect the thematic areas of ESPERIDTA teaching modules.

The survey instrument consisted of **three parts** per phrase:

**Part A – Lexical Perception:** Students were asked to paraphrase or explain the meaning of each compound phrase in their own words.

**Part B – Emotional Evaluation:** Students selected from a set of emotional responses (e.g., *interested*, *confused*, *neutral*, *resistant*, *enthusiastic*) and could elaborate in a comment box.

**Part C – Clarity and Familiarity Ratings:** Students rated each phrase on two 5-point Likert scales:

**Clarity:** 1 (*completely unclear*) to 5 (*very clear*)

**Familiarity:** 1 (*never encountered*) to 5 (*very familiar*)

The survey was administered online using the institutional learning management system, and participation was voluntary, anonymous, and conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

To comprehensively examine student responses, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. Quantitative data analysis involved calculating the frequency and average scores of emotional reactions, as well as clarity and familiarity ratings for each of the compound phrases under review. These numerical trends were then visualized using bar charts and comparative tables to allow for more precise cross-phrase interpretation and pattern identification.

In parallel, the qualitative component focused on the open-ended paraphrases and commentaries provided by students. These responses were subjected to thematic coding using both inductive and deductive approaches. The coding framework drew on established methods in discourse analysis and affective linguistics. Key coding categories included reformulation, distancing, critical or ironic commentary, and the use of metaphorical language. In addition, affective-linguistic markers, such as evaluative adjectives, intensifiers, and hedges, were identified to capture subtle nuances in students' emotional positioning.

Three overarching analytical frameworks guided the interpretation of the data. First, lexical analysis was employed to evaluate structural clarity, semantic transparency, and the strategies students used to rephrase unfamiliar or complex terms. Second, discourse analysis enabled the identification of metalinguistic behaviors, including commentary on institutional language and student self-positioning in relation to it. Finally, affective analysis provided insights into how students conveyed or concealed their emotional reactions when confronted with abstract or ideologically charged academic language.

Together, these methodological tools allowed for a nuanced, triangulated understanding of how students engage cognitively, discursively, and emotionally with the specialized terminology of digital European Studies.

## 5. Results

The analysis of student responses reveals nuanced differences in how the five compound thematic constructs were *lexically perceived*, *emotionally evaluated*, and *discursively engaged with*. This section presents both quantitative findings (clarity, familiarity, and emotional reactions) and qualitative insights (student paraphrasing, commentary, and discursive patterns).

### 5.1 Overview of Quantitative Results (Table 1)

As shown in the table above, students rated European Studies through Digital Political Science as the most familiar and clear. In contrast, European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies received the lowest clarity and familiarity scores, accompanied by the highest level of confusion.

### 5.2 Phrase 1: *European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies*

Among the five thematic constructs presented to students, the phrase “*European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies*” elicited the most significant challenges in terms of both lexical perception and emotional engagement. Quantitative results indicate relatively low clarity (mean score of 2.8 out of 5) and familiarity (2.4), with over half of the participants (53%) selecting “*confused*” as their primary emotional reaction. This was followed by “*neutral*” (31%) and a smaller proportion indicating “*interested*” (16%).

Qualitative responses revealed substantial uncertainty about the phrase’s intended meaning. Many students struggled to decipher the expression “*European Languages Policies*”, expressing doubts about whether it referred to policies supporting foreign language education within the EU, official language regulations, or broader multilingual strategies. The addition of the adjective “*Digital*” further complicated interpretation. For some, it evoked associations with online learning platforms or machine translation tools, while for others it remained ambiguous and unanchored in a specific pedagogical or policy context.

Several students described the phrase as “*too long*”, “*bureaucratic*”, or “*dry*”, emphasizing the perceived lack of emotional resonance or conceptual clarity. One respondent noted: “*It sounds like something from a policy report, not a course I would*

*want to take*”. Another student questioned whether the term “*European Languages*” implied official EU languages or the broader diversity of minority and regional languages in Europe. Such comments reflect the linguistic and ideological density of the expression, as well as the difficulty students faced in locating themselves within its semantic field.

From a discursive perspective, student responses were characterized by high rates of rewording, hedging, and interpretive guesswork. Many began their paraphrases with qualifiers such as “*I think it might mean...*” or “*Perhaps this refers to...*”, suggesting a lack of certainty. Rather than straightforward definitions, students often offered speculative constructions, indicating that the phrase required considerable cognitive effort to decode.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while the phrase attempts to synthesize several essential dimensions of EU language and education policy, its complexity – both linguistic and conceptual – may hinder student engagement. The lexical opacity and perceived ideological weight of the term signal a potential disconnect between institutional discourse and student-centered learning.

### 5.3 Phrase 2: *European Studies through Digital Historical Developments*

In contrast to the previous phrase, student reactions to “*European Studies through Digital Historical Developments*” were markedly more positive and engaged. This construct was among the highest rated in terms of both clarity (average score of 3.9) and familiarity (3.5), with emotional responses concentrated around feelings of *interest* (41%) and *curiosity* (33%). Only a minority expressed neutrality (26%), and notably, none reported confusion or resistance.

Students appeared to interpret this phrase with relative ease, often linking it to digital methods of studying the past. Paraphrases included references to “*exploring history through online archives*,” “*using technology to analyze historical change in Europe*,” and “*learning about European development using digital tools like interactive maps or virtual museums*”. These interpretations suggest that students had pre-existing mental models for combining historical content with digital media, likely reinforced by their exposure to online educational resources, documentaries, or interactive historical simulations.

Table 1

Overview of Quantitative Results

Phrase	Average Clarity (1–5)	Average Familiarity (1–5)	Most Common Emotion
<i>Digital European Languages Policies</i>	2.8	2.4	Confusion
<i>Digital Historical Developments</i>	3.9	3.5	Interest
<i>Digital European Law</i>	3.7	3.2	Curiosity
<i>Digital Management</i>	3.5	3.1	Neutral
<i>Digital Political Science</i>	4.1	3.9	Enthusiasm

Several participants extended the meaning of the phrase beyond education, noting that digital platforms have transformed how historical narratives are constructed and accessed in public discourse. One student, for example, connected the phrase to the use of augmented reality (AR) in museums, while another mentioned the role of digital memory in shaping collective European identity.

Emotionally, the phrase resonated with students as contemporary, relevant, and methodologically innovative. Many saw it as a meaningful synthesis of content and technology, without the bureaucratic undertones present in the first phrase. There was also less ambiguity about the scope of the term: students seemed confident in associating it with topics such as EU history, post-war developments, and digital humanities.

Discursively, responses were framed with greater assertiveness and thematic elaboration. Unlike the hedging and semantic guesswork observed in the previous section, here students demonstrated confidence and familiarity, often building on the phrase rather than deconstructing it. This reflects a more substantial alignment between the terminology used and the students' academic or personal frames of reference.

Overall, *“European Studies through Digital Historical Developments”* was interpreted as a clear and engaging construct that effectively combined digital innovation with accessible academic content. It appears to occupy a middle ground between abstract institutional language and lived educational experience – a position that may account for its relatively high emotional resonance and lexical clarity.

#### 5.4 Phrase 3: *European Studies through Digital European Law*

The thematic construct *“European Studies through Digital European Law”* elicited moderately high levels of clarity and familiarity among student respondents, with average scores of 3.7 and 3.2, respectively. Emotional reactions were primarily positive, although more tempered compared to the previous phrase. The most frequently reported responses were *curiosity* (39%), *neutrality* (31%), and *interest* (24%), indicating a general willingness to engage with the concept, albeit with some uncertainty regarding its precise scope.

Students tended to interpret the phrase as referring to digital tools or online environments used to study legal systems within the European Union. Many associated it with e-learning in EU law, access to legal databases such as EUR-Lex, or the digitalization of legal processes more broadly. Typical paraphrases included: *“Learning about European law through online platforms”*, *“Understanding legal frameworks in the EU using digital materials”*, and *“Studying legal systems in Europe with the help of technology”*.

While the base concept – *European Law* – was familiar to students, the compound nature of the phrase introduced some ambiguity. For instance, sev-

eral students questioned whether the term implied the digital governance of law, the legal aspects of digital transformation, or simply the digital delivery of traditional legal education. These uncertainties did not lead to overt confusion, but they did limit students' ability to articulate or fully personalize the construct. One respondent wrote: *“It sounds like a module title, but I'm not exactly sure what part of law is meant”*.

Interestingly, a subset of responses reflected a more critical awareness of how law is represented and taught in digital formats. One student noted: *“It could refer to how laws themselves are changing because of digital challenges – like GDPR or AI regulation”*. This comment illustrates the potential for this phrase to be interpreted in both narrow (pedagogical) and broad (politico-legal) terms.

From a discursive standpoint, the responses were characterized by structured paraphrasing and thematic expansion, but with fewer emotional intensifiers or subjective commentary than in the previous construct. Students appeared to adopt a more analytical tone, reflecting the academic register typically associated with legal discourse.

Overall, *“European Studies through Digital European Law”* was perceived as intellectually engaging but conceptually layered. While most students were able to offer coherent interpretations, their reactions suggest that the phrase operates at the intersection of disciplinary familiarity and digital abstraction, requiring both domain-specific knowledge and contextual cues to be fully understood and appreciated.

#### 5.5 Phrase 4: *European Studies through Digital Management*

The phrase *“European Studies through Digital Management”* yielded ambivalent interpretations and generally moderate engagement from student respondents. While its clarity score averaged 3.5, familiarity was slightly lower at 3.1. Emotionally, students were largely neutral in their evaluations – *neutral* was selected by 45% of participants – while *interest* was reported by 31%, and a smaller portion (12%) expressed *skepticism* or mild *confusion*.

Qualitative responses revealed a significant degree of semantic ambiguity surrounding the term *“digital management”*. While some students associated the phrase with project or institutional management in a digital context, others struggled to determine the specific referent. As one student phrased it, *“Management of what? Is this about managing European projects online, or digitalizing European institutions?”* This uncertainty was echoed in other responses that suggested potential interpretations ranging from administrative coordination and educational management platforms to corporate digital governance at the EU level.

A recurring pattern in the data was the broad and unspecific nature of the word *“management”*, which lacks a fixed semantic core in the absence of an explicit disciplinary modifier. Unlike phrases such

as “digital law” or “digital history”, which evoke relatively bounded academic fields, “digital management” was perceived as vague or overly abstract. One respondent commented: “It sounds like EU jargon or a consultancy buzzword. There’s no clear subject matter to grasp onto”.

Emotionally, students appeared cautious but not disengaged. While few expressed enthusiasm, many attempted to assign plausible meaning by drawing on familiar contexts – such as university project work, Erasmus+ administration, or EU-funded digital platforms. These interpretations, although speculative, reflected a genuine effort to make sense of a phrase whose components were lexically familiar but conceptually diffuse.

From a discursive perspective, students employed tentative language and modal constructions, such as “could mean”, “might refer to”, or “I guess it’s about...”. This marked shift from the confident rewording observed in previous phrases suggests a lower degree of semantic anchoring and reduced affective engagement. Moreover, some participants explicitly critiqued the phrase’s lack of transparency, labelling it “vague”, “generic”, or “institutionally distant”.

In summary, “European Studies through Digital Management” was met with interpretive caution and moderate emotional detachment. While students were generally able to propose reasonable paraphrases, the phrase lacked the thematic specificity and emotional salience that characterized more successful constructs such as “Digital Political Science” or “Digital Historical Developments”. These findings suggest that abstract or multi-purpose terms – particularly when used in compound expressions – may require additional scaffolding in student-centered curricula to ensure comprehension, relevance, and engagement.

### 5.6 Phrase 5: *European Studies through Digital Political Science*

The phrase “European Studies through Digital Political Science” was met with the highest level of lexical clarity, emotional resonance, and thematic familiarity among all five constructs presented in the survey. It received an average clarity rating of 4.1 and a familiarity score of 3.9, significantly outperforming other phrases. Emotionally, students expressed predominantly positive reactions, with *enthusiasm* being the most frequent response (42%), followed by *interest* (36%) and *engagement* (17%). Notably, no respondents selected ‘confusion’ or ‘resistance’.

Students consistently interpreted the phrase as referring to the study of European political systems and institutions through digital tools, platforms, or methods. Their paraphrases reflected a clear and confident grasp of the phrase’s components. Examples included: “Learning about EU institutions using online simulations or digital data analysis”, “Studying political systems through modern tech”,

and “Courses on digital democracy and governance in Europe”. Many students explicitly related the construct to current practices in their academic programs, indicating both cognitive alignment and personal relevance.

Several respondents referred to concrete tools and learning experiences, such as virtual parliament simulations, online policy mapping, data-driven electoral analysis, and digital civic participation platforms. This suggests that “digital political science” is already embedded – formally or informally – in student learning environments. One participant noted: “This phrase makes perfect sense to me – it’s basically what we’re doing in our European politics seminar”. Another added: “Finally, something that sounds real and useful, not abstract”.

The emotional tone of responses was notably more engaged than for other phrases. Students expressed agency, intellectual stimulation, and future-oriented thinking, often positioning themselves as active participants in European political processes facilitated by digital means. The perceived authenticity of the phrase, combined with its topical relevance in contemporary democratic discourse, contributed to this strong affective reaction.

From a discursive standpoint, responses exhibited assertive rewording, confident elaboration, and expansion into related political domains. Students framed the concept within broader discussions on digital citizenship, algorithmic governance, and transparency in EU policymaking. Unlike earlier constructs where students hesitated or speculated, here they actively co-constructed meaning, drawing on disciplinary knowledge and lived academic experience.

In sum, “European Studies through Digital Political Science” appears to function as an intellectually and emotionally accessible construct, one that aligns closely with students’ cognitive frameworks and educational trajectories. It benefits from semantic transparency, disciplinary familiarity, and perceived applicability – all of which contribute to higher lexical engagement and emotional resonance. This suggests that well-structured compound expressions that reflect real-world practices and recognizable content domains are more likely to foster student understanding, motivation, and academic identification.

## 6. Discussion

This study offers empirical insight into how undergraduate students perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to complex thematic constructs at the intersection of European Studies and digital transformation. The analysis confirms that the lexical and emotional accessibility of educational terminology is not uniform: student reactions vary significantly depending on syntactic complexity, semantic transparency, and thematic familiarity. These findings both validate and extend existing theories



in cognitive linguistics, affective neurolinguistics, and critical discourse analysis.

Consistent with the works of Jackendoff and Audring [Jackendoff, Audring, 2020] and Hagoort and Indefrey [Hagoort, Indefrey, 2014], students' difficulty with constructs such as "*European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies*" highlights the high cognitive load imposed by deeply nested noun phrases and bureaucratic collocations. Participants frequently reworded or hedged their responses, indicating uncertainty. The emotional responses – predominantly *confusion* and *neutrality* – demonstrate the limited resonance of abstract EU policy terminology, a problem previously documented by Wodak and Fairclough [Wodak, Fairclough, 2010] in their analysis of European education discourse.

Affective engagement varied greatly depending on the phrase. Constructs like "*Digital Historical Developments*" and "*Digital Political Science*" evoked higher emotional resonance, particularly in terms of *enthusiasm*, *interest*, and *engagement*. This supports findings by Hinojosa et al. [Hinojosa et al., 2020] and Kissler and Koessler [Kissler, Koessler, 2011], who argue that emotional salience facilitates semantic processing and promotes deeper cognitive engagement. The phrase "*Digital Political Science*", in particular, functioned as a lexical anchor, bridging abstract institutional language and students' lived academic realities. Here, students exhibited a discursive shift from speculative paraphrasing to confident elaboration, invoking concrete tools such as simulations, data dashboards, and civic platforms.

Constructs perceived as semantically transparent and thematically familiar elicited more positive affective responses and more active discursive behavior. In line with Dafouz and Smit's [Dafouz and Smit's, 2016] conceptual framework on English-medium instruction and disciplinary discourse, the results suggest that disciplinary embeddedness plays a key role in lexical clarity and student comprehension. Constructs such as "*Digital Political Science*" and "*Digital Management*" aligned well with students' curricular exposure, thereby reducing ambiguity and enhancing their confidence. In contrast, terms like "*European Languages Policies*" and "*Digital European Law*" suffered from terminological opacity, often prompting interpretive guesswork.

The data also underscore the ongoing tension between institutional and learner discourse. Many students found specific constructs "dry", "unclear", or "too bureaucratic", indicating a mismatch between official EU educational terminology and student-friendly phrasing. This echoes the work of Bilbao et al. [Bilbao, 2020] and Gendron and Barrett [Gendron and Barrett, 2018], who argue for greater reflexivity in educational communication. Students' metalinguistic comments suggest a desire for more

emotionally resonant and relatable formulations that retain academic rigor while enhancing accessibility.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings point to a clear need for linguistically reflexive and student-centered curricula in European Studies. Phrases that reflect students' disciplinary identities, such as those linked to political science and management, generated the highest lexical engagement. Educators and policymakers should therefore critically examine the linguistic framing of educational modules and learning outcomes. Terms rooted in abstract policy discourse may require explicit scaffolding, using visuals, analogies, or case studies to bridge comprehension gaps.

For policymakers, the study underscores the importance of semantic transparency and emotional accessibility in the development of digital multilingual policies. As Kapranov et al. [Kapranov et al., 2025] argue, digital transformation in European Studies must account not only for infrastructure and teacher training, but also for the lexical and discursive dimensions of learner engagement. Our findings suggest that fostering students' linguistic agency – encouraging them to critique, rephrase, and co-construct meaning – may be a valuable pedagogical and civic tool in cultivating informed European citizens.

## 7. Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

This study, conducted within the framework of the ESPERIDTA project (*European Studies for Supporting Polish Education and Research in Digital Transformation: Interdisciplinary Approach*, Grant Agreement No. 101172710), explored how undergraduate students perceive and respond to complex thematic constructs in the field of European Studies, particularly those that integrate digital and multilingual dimensions. By analyzing student interpretations, emotional reactions, and paraphrasing behaviors, the research sheds light on the cognitive and affective challenges posed by EU educational terminology.

The findings indicate that many students struggled to decode the meaning of phrases such as "*European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies*", often due to lexical density, conceptual ambiguity, and lack of prior exposure to institutional discourse. Emotional responses ranged from confusion and detachment to mild interest, with numerous students highlighting the abstract or "bureaucratic" nature of the terminology. The tendency to rephrase, question, or speculate about meaning revealed an underlying tension between institutional language and learner-centered comprehension.

These observations have direct implications for the design of European Studies curricula, especially in digital or multilingual formats. Educational stakeholders should consider integrating reflexive and student-centered approaches to terminology, offering scaffolding strategies that demystify institutional lan-

guage and terminology. Introducing compound phrases gradually, providing contextual cues, and encouraging discursive engagement can foster both conceptual clarity and emotional resonance among students.

Several areas merit further exploration. First, longitudinal studies are necessary to examine how students' perceptions of academic terminology evolve over time and across various levels of higher education. Second, future research could examine the role of language proficiency and linguistic background in shaping emotional and cognitive responses to policy-based vocabulary. Third, there is a need to investigate the impact of digital tools and AI-based platforms in mediating students' understanding of complex discourse, particularly in multilingual and multicultural settings. Finally, comparative studies across EU countries could illuminate whether the observed reactions are culturally specific or part of a broader pan-European trend.

In summary, the study reinforces the importance of aligning EU educational language with the lived experiences, emotional responses, and interpretive strategies of students. Doing so not only enhances pedagogical effectiveness but also supports the broader goals of inclusivity, engagement, and democratic participation in European education.

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## Appendix

## Selected Student Reactions and Paraphrases

Original Phrase	Student Reaction	Paraphrase / Interpretation
<i>European Studies through Digital European Languages Policies</i>	“Confusing – I don’t know if this is about learning languages or something political”.	“Maybe how language policies are created or used online?”
<i>European Studies through Digital Historical Developments</i>	“Sounds academic but too abstract”.	“Studying history with digital tools, I guess?”
<i>European Studies through Digital European Law</i>	“This feels more clear – maybe EU law classes online?”	“Studying law using digital platforms and resources”.
<i>European Studies through Digital Management</i>	“Could be about managing EU projects or programs online”.	“Learning EU-related management topics via digital tools”.
<i>European Studies through Digital Political Science</i>	“I imagine online classes about European politics”.	“How politics in Europe is studied or taught online”.

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