

# Mental Problems of “Language Gap” for the International Students

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, researchers have seen a rapid increase in university students studying abroad. Investigators find that international students are more likely to be suffered from psychological problems. Language plays a vital role in the maintenance of their study. The ability to adapt to a new environment and the understanding of the language have considerable influence on the mental health of students. The goal of this paper is to introduce how serious mental issues are caused by the language barrier, what specific psychological symptoms are common among international students, how students avoid those issues and how policymakers and school administrators provide support to students from different backgrounds with psychological issues. The author looked into some reports and surveys to investigate how the language barrier influences the mental health of international students both academically and socially, as well as how pandemic might further affect their mental health that is being suffered due to the difficulty of language. In this paper, samples were analyzed on how language skills influence academic performance as previously reported by Erlenawati Sawir (2012). Experiences between domestic students and international students were compared to measure the effect of language. Case studies of Latino students were used to show how international students demand bilingual resources. The relationship between anxiety and learning effect were determined, and “emotion regulation” were connected with academic results. The passage also paid attention to the reasons why the “language gap” leads to specific mental health issues. According to the data and information, it is found that international students are less likely to get help from mental support because of the language barrier. The author also investigated how schools could provide more support, for instance, on employing bilingual consultants and encouraging students to open their hearts by themselves. In conclusion, the author pointed out how the language difficulties might influence mental issues and then extended the language barriers to immigrants' issues.

**Keywords:** *Language barrier, Psychological issues, International students, Pandemic*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today, many students choose to study abroad to get a better degree or broaden their horizons. However, they always have many challenges caused by the language gap, which might lead to some mental problems. Psychological issues were commonly seen in international students before the coronavirus. Based on the 2009 report of “Journal of American College Health”, international students are more likely to get depressed than domestic students, and their depression is 3 times more serious than domestic students [1]. Then, another survey of 2019 showed an increasing trend of depression in which 25 percent of international students might have anxiety [1].

During the pandemic, the psychological issues become more serious: fear accounts for 77.6 percent in international students while anxiety accounts for 76.6 percent, and insomnia for 77.6 percent. Loneliness becomes more severe during the COVID-19 period [2].

What is more, according to Xiong J, Lipsitz, et al (2020), “PTSD accounts for 7-53.8 percent and stress almost for 8.1-81.9 percent of the population from different countries, such as China, Spain and Iran [3].

In the thesis, the author first talked about the reasons why the “Language gap” leads international students to specific psychological problems that are commonly seen. Then, the author discussed what specific challenges students meet during their school life overseas, and how to help them adapt easily.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the common reasons leading to mental issues and how to avoid them in advance. The author hopes policymakers and school administrators could put more focus on how language problems influence the mental health of international students, and schools could realize how bilingual consultants are important in helping international students solve their mental issues. In short, the importance of this paper is to understand how language barriers are essential to psychological and immigrants' issues.

## **2. REASONS FOR MENTAL PROBLEMS**

From the "Report about International Educational Exchange in the Open Door of 2009", it is found that the population of international students is 5.5 percent of the university population. The number has consistently increased every year from 2018, and the total number was 1 million up to 2019. In addition, from the report of the commercial U.S. department, about 44.7 billion tuition were contributed by the international students in 2018 [4].

According to "The Institute of International Education (IIE) and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs", many students from different countries have the strong desire to become exchange students in the U.S. universities because they are attracted by the U.S. higher education. Based on the data, "there will be almost 1.1 million students from different countries joining U.S. universities from 2019-2020. And it still has a regular growth of international populations." [4].

The enrollment of international students has been increasing in recent years. Studying abroad is a very common experience. However, the study of Hunt & Eisenberg shows that many university students are suffering from mental health problems [5]. Hunt & Eisenberg (2010) also argues that those mental problems might be related to the stress of being in a foreign environment [5].

When coming to a new country, it is easy to have many difficulties because of the "language gap". Challenges are related to both academic and social adjustments.

### ***2.1. Academic difficulty caused by the language barrier***

The most obvious issue is the academic difficulty caused by the language barrier. International students are not familiar with their second language compared to their mother language, especially the immigrant children.

Many immigrants have "limited English Proficiency (LEP)". For instance, there are 50 percent of Mexican

immigrants living in California who believe speaking English is very challenging. Besides, there are also more than 25 percent of Asian immigrants who have difficulty accessing English.

This makes it hard for them to understand the study tasks and the office hours with their professors. Erlenawati Sawir collected interview reports from some Asian students. He found that international students did not have confidence in oral English and faced many serious learning problems [6]. The ability to process language is important for conveying information and developing knowledge of complex processes [7]. Erlenawati Sawir also emphasized the weakness of grammar and reading ability as the main part for language barriers, which also has a negative effect on their grades [6]. Most exams are made up of long-sentence reading and they also need to write the length paper by themselves. If International students are not familiar with the English language, they would have a hard time finishing exams in limited time.

According to the study from Yan, Lu, and Shaohua Pei, "They examine the experience of both domestic and international students and analyze the view of both students and professors. Then, they find that compared with domestic, international students have more academic challenges than domestic students, but they study harder [8]. In the long term, language would influence their grades. Many international students have a hard time comprehending spoken language and understanding language in different contexts."

What is more, racial segregation would hinder the academic performance of international students. in the view of Gandara (2010), "As the USA becomes more diverse, the racial segregation increases a lot." [9]. Racial segregation is that people from the same country are more likely to stay together. For example, a student is from China, and he or she is more likely to talk with students from China too. Gandara argues that there are some reasons for racial segregation, such as the history of black/ white people and the language barrier [9]. For instance, many Latino students who speak Spanish are always isolated from English-speaking students. They have difficulties in speaking professional English and they feel less confident when they speak in English. That is why they prefer to speak with students from the same background or who speak the same language [9].

The idea of Gandara Rumberger(2008) shows that English learners (EL) need to receive more professional educational resources and more specific instructions because many English learners (EL) lack the knowledge in academic English, and they can only express themselves in a shallow level [10].

Besides, many schools could not provide useful language programs and professional teachers because of the low salary [9]. Some programs for English learners

are not very effective because teachers in the program could not communicate with the students very fluently. If schools could hire more bilingual teachers, it would be better for students to communicate with teachers who can speak the same language.

When it comes to the psychological aspect, the language barrier would make students feel frustrated and feel stressful. Students might have some negative emotions because they cannot express their simple ideas and feel embarrassed when they make some grammar mistakes, which is not beneficial for them to recognize themselves. In the long term, they would face severe results of their academic grades or negative emotions from other students. Finally, they might choose to abandon their academy. (SLCN)

In addition, because of the issues of the pandemic, many people feel anxious and then get a disease called coronavirus anxiety [11]. International pressure is more academic. Cognitive anxiety is connected with pandemics and worries about the coronavirus, whereas common anxiety is physiologic arousal due to the pandemic.

Anxiety is the major effect of remote learning. Zhao, T., Fu, Z., etc. (2021) mentions two strategies to reduce this psychological problem. They investigated the survey based on the questionnaire from 239 Chinese students who are taking remote learning about the importance of emotion to the study and the long-term negative effects of anxiety [12]. The results show that “cognitive reappraisal” has the positive effect of remote learning and could relieve the symptoms of anxiety.

Overall, Zhao, T., Fu, Z., etc.(2021) find the correlation between anxiety and learning effect: students who got serious anxiety problems would associate with lower efficiency of learning [12]. Zhao, T., Fu, Z., etc(2021) introduce the influence of “emotion regulation”: perceiving higher control of emotion would have better academic performance because control learners since the higher degree are more resilient to the pandemic situation and they can be more flexible to stress [12].

In short, isolation is the major problem of anxiety, and control of emotion could reduce the feeling of loneliness, which might reduce the problem.

## ***2.2. Challenge in their social relationship***

Language becomes a big challenge to students’ social relationship. The language barrier would be challenging for the mental aspect because the international student with poor language is more likely to encounter skills problems. Good language skill is very important to a personal relationship and necessary for university students to make friends. When they want to make foreign friends, they need to understand native

jokes and slang when they are talking. Language barriers will hinder their understanding of some native cultures and verbal slang. Consequently, they might be unlikely to exchange ideas and feelings with foreign students, which makes it hard to make friends. In the class, they might be less engaged with professors and other students, which leads them to feel separated. In the long term, they might feel lonelier than domestic students. Since many international students may be far away from their parents, it makes them feel homesick.

Due to the language gap, many students are not confident about speaking the language [13], which may affect their relationship with professors and friends. This idea may make students feel ashamed. This is why lower language proficiency makes it more difficult for them to communicate with local students [14]. Many students do not have good psychological skills to face those challenges. For instance, they might find nostalgia due to the difficulty of adapting to a new culture [15]. They may feel lonely and depressed in the long term, which may lead to mental problems in the future. To help international students realize the challenges in details and then learn some strategies to overcome those obstacles, it is very important to know social difficulties first and then learn how to solve these problems while they are studying in the United States.

Glory Gatwiri (2015) employs the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to investigate how the skills of language influence the psychological state of international students [16]. In his finding, lower English skills would increase the possibility of racial stress, academic difficulty, and even mental problems. From this research, Language is significant to communicate with people and make good social relationships [17]. In conclusion, a good language skill would help international students immerse into a new culture well [18]. International students with low English proficiency would find it difficult to explore mental health services because they can not express their feelings through fluent language. The language barrier might make it hard for international students to have access to school health services. The California Language Access Coalition reports that poor English skills might hinder international students access to mental health services [19]. Because of the language barrier, the psychological consultants could not communicate with international students effectively. Also, in this way, they are unable to know their culture of family, what kind of risk might lead to the problem, and even difficult to give correct diagnose and effective suggestions. Therefore, consultants should deal with those language barrier issues [20]. Schools should be equipped with psychologists who can speak a second language. The California Department of Mental Health (DMH) collected data and information on the number of beneficiaries. It shows that five percent of the Medi-Cal

population can speak a second language across 57 mental health agencies in California.

According to some research about language barrier issues, Fiscella investigated different foreign students and found that “compared with English-speaking students, Spanish-speaking students have less mental health visits and even physician visits.” [21].

Focusing on the research about Asian Canadians, Li and Browne (2000) said that language ability is very important to receive mental health services, so poor language might hinder the effect of psychological service [22]. Jang, Lee, and Woo (1998) investigated the 1,1810 Chinese population in San Francisco about how factors such as “income, language, and citizenship” affect their mental services. Then, they find most monolingual Chinese have no insurance or mental health service [23].

Language barriers also became another indicator influencing mental issues of the Chinese community because 62% of the sample have difficulty speaking English well, 7.7% of them can not interpret correctly and 3.8% worry about bad translation. In addition, 73% of the population have the intention to get help from mental care, but up to 56.1% of them could not get help because of the language barrier [24].

In a mid-western Medicaid managed care plan, language was a major difficulty. Kaiser finds that people with language barrier have difficulty accessing and realizing the function of “Medicaid managed care services” [25].

### 3. SOLUTIONS

Hayes and Lin argue that the increase of social support could mitigate the psychological problem of foreign students [15]. According to Davis and Garrod, international students might feel isolated since they have a hard time bonding with the new culture. However, social support may serve as an important tool to help them adapt easily [26].

Some school organizations such as the international center, SSIS, and culture-mixed club provide some information about this research question and also give international students special support. It suggests that educating students should pay attention to their difficulties and emotional needs. In addition, many universities in the United States have some organizations to provide support for international students, and some interesting programs to help them adapt to the new environment. Hence, International students can get support from the school if they know their specific challenges.

International students could elevate their English by themselves. They should try their best to communicate with native students and practice their communication

skills in different ways. For instance, they can imitate the pronunciation of native speakers and expand their vocabulary through some useful apps such as Hello English. Hello, Talk is another conversational way to improve English speaking by communicating with people from different countries.

International students should have the intention to pursue help from the mental health service. Schools could employ some bilingual psychiatrists to help the international students better open their hearts. Schools can also carry out some lectures emphasizing the importance of pursuing help about mental health care by students themselves. Some research shows that compared with domestic students, international students are less likely to pursue psychological care by themselves.

Journal of American College Health of 2021 reported that international students who aware they need mental support is 17.6 percent lower than domestic students. Up to 50 percent of domestic students had taken mental consulting into consideration, while only one percent of international students thought of counseling support. In reality, more than 30 percent of domestic students had accepted mental health services, while only less than 17 percent of international students had accepted mental services.

“For international students, opening up to people or mental health professionals is completely different from American students,” says Tandukar. “At least from my country, we are very private people. We do not really like talking about our problems.” Tandukar believed that mental health supporters should aware that more people like them providing [mental health] services are needed— “people who we are comfortable talking to.” That is why bilingual psychological service is very necessary.

### 4. CONCLUSION

To some extent, the language barrier is the second reason why immigrants cannot achieve their American Dreams successfully. They run away from what they think is an abusive home to pursue more working opportunities in the new land. However, because those immigrants come from a different country, it is not attainable for them to speak English as fluently as American citizens. Furthermore, some of them have not even spoken English before. Examples include a nineteen-year-old Czech boy George, mentioned by Ehrenreich in her book *The Hearts of Men: American dreams and the flight from commitment*. George was a dishwasher who worked hard every day and was afraid of talking with others in English. George received some unfair treatment because of the language barrier, and he did not receive his salary. One day, George was accused of stealing, but he could not defend himself because he

did not speak English well, therefore was unable to understand the kind of trouble he was in [27]. George could not speak English as well as a native American. The author noticed that George tried to have a conversation with her, but it was hard to understand what he was saying because of the language barrier. Even though George worked hard, his poor English hindered him to achieve his American Dream.

Immigrants face many disadvantages to attain their American Dreams because of the language obstacle and discrimination from American citizens. However, the issue has not been softened very well and President Trump made this issue even worse. Trump believes that full border security is important to immigrant issues. He tries to reform the law of America's border and plans to deport more immigrants.

The author found the language gap would cause some study and social difficulty to international students, which might increase the possibility of having mental issues. In addition, language barriers can hinder effective communication between international students and school psychologists. During the period of the pandemic, the language barrier would lead to issues of anxiety, which might reduce the learning efficiency. The author further discussed about how the combination of isolation and language barriers can lead to some psychological problems, and analyzed the relationship between language barriers and immigration issues during the the pandemic.

To evoke the population to pay attention to the mental health of international students, and help students themselves figure out how to solve their mental issues, this paper provides some useful insights in seeking help from friends, school faculty, and students themselves. Moreover, it examines the impacts of language barriers on immigrant issues as well. The findings shed new light on how bilingual teaching resources are significant in providing international students with supports both academically and socially.

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