



Elderly Migrants' Language Anxiety and Social Integration in China

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Abstract. This paper primarily explores the relationship between language anxiety and social integration among elderly migrants. Based on interview materials and considering previous research, the researcher conducted an empirical study on the relationship between language anxiety and the social integration of elderly migrants. The main method used in this paper is a thematic analysis of interview data, monologue data, and listener feedback data. For the reasons for elderly migrants' language barriers and language anxiety, we identified three themes: 1) individual background, 2) Mandarin and anxiety, and 3) linguistic landscapes and related factors in communication. As for how language anxiety impacts elderly migrants' social integration, this study identified two themes: 1) language anxiety and social integration, and 2) measures implemented to promote the social integration of elderly migrants. Through these two themes, we explored the relationship between language anxiety and social integration among elderly migrants, as well as how to promote their social integration.

Keywords: Elderly migrants, Language anxiety, Social integration

1 Introduction

Elderly migrants are also known as drifting parents [1]. At present, there is no unified definition of elderly migrants in the academic world, but they all revolve around "flow + aging". This study adopts Liu's definition "non-locally registered elderly following their children from rural areas or cities afar to the current residences of short-term or long-term life" [2]. As an essential part of the floating population, elderly migrants have made significant contributions to their children's families and society. However, due to the influence of geographical and linguistic differences, they may encounter language anxiety, social integration issues, and other difficulties.

Related research on elderly migrants mainly focuses on two aspects. First, elderly migrants find social integration a great challenge. The economic conditions of the elderly are not optimistic [3], and goods of high prices, especially digital equipment, are difficult for the elderly with a lower economic level to afford [4]. In addition, it is difficult to adapt to new life due to differences in language, lifestyle, and opinions [5].

In the process of social communication, mutual help among elderly migrants is common [6], while they may engage in "zero communication" with the local people [7]. They are psychologically lost and lonely [8]. Second, another focus of previous research pertains to the influence mechanism of the social integration of elderly migrants. Individual factors include educational background and cultural attainment; family factors include family economic income, economic resources, and family role; and social factors include social system guarantee and social support [9]. Scholars then propose solutions at the levels of the elderly, family, community, and government [10].

Social integration is largely related to language anxiety. Research on language anxiety of elderly migrants. When it comes to language anxiety, we have to talk about language barriers. Each dialect has a unique pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, so the old migrants have language barriers in different places. In the first-tier cities in China, most people speak Mandarin [11]; therefore, the language barriers and language anxiety in this article all point to one's dialect and Mandarin. As a cause of language anxiety, language barriers can have a domino effect [12], which is ultimately harmful to health and social integration [13-14]. Therefore, language skills and language proficiency are particularly important [15]. To this end, they should also carry out language services and interpersonal communication skills training. For example, using the methods of group work and community work helps to improve the language skills and communication skills of the old migrants [15]. The government can also hold fellow townsman meetings so that the elderly have a sense of belonging [16].

At present, the research on elderly migrants from the perspective of linguistics focuses on the relationship between language barriers and health and social integration. However, they do not elaborate on more minor aspects. For example, in the process of anxiety, how elderly migrants adjust the pronunciation, words, and language order repeatedly. This paper tries to explore the language anxiety of elderly migrants, and specifically consider the manifestations, performances, influence, and solution paths of their anxiety, to improve the sense of belonging and happiness of elderly migrants.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Classification and Status Quo of Elderly Migrants

Elderly migrants have attracted much scholarly attention from various fields, such as sociology, public policy, and mental health [2]. Different fields follow different classification criteria for this group, such as single versus double migrants (the number of migrants), long-term versus short-term migrants (the length of time), active versus passive migrants (willingness), intra-provincial versus inter-provincial migrants (distance), supporters, nanny and working type (migrants' purpose) [9,17,18]. Research on elderly migrants in different fields is mostly based on the individual characteristics of the elderly and their interaction with families. Elderly migrants should enjoy their old age in their homeland, but migrate to a place afar.

They cannot adapt to life in big cities. They have few friends around and a lot of language communication barriers, which pose difficulty in forming a sense of identity, and force them into a marginalized position [19]. Therefore, the social integration of elderly migrants has also become a research hotspot.

2.2 Social Integration of Elderly Migrants

The academic community mainly studies social adaptation and integration from the ecosystem theory, social support theory, and social integration theory. It is worth emphasizing that these three theories all emphasize multi-subject and multi-level. Ecosystem theory mainly analyzes the problems encountered by elderly migrants in the process of social integration from the three levels: family, community, and government, and puts forward feasible countermeasures [17]. Social support theory suggests building the social support network of elderly migrants from formal support (policy and system support and financial support provided by the state, government, and social level) and informal support (spiritual and material support provided by family, community, friends, and other subjects) [20], so that elderly migrants can better integrate into the inflow place. Social integration, as a dynamic process derived from social mobility and stratification, requires the joint efforts of multiple subjects [21]. In the face of the dilemma of cultural and behavioral integration, family and community must cooperate. Moreover, individuals and the government should also make efforts in psychological integration, social integration, personal identification, and other aspects.

2.3 Language Anxiety Among Elderly Migrants

The language anxiety of elderly migrants is usually a knotty problem in the process of social integration. If elderly migrants have language barriers and language anxiety and do not pay attention to and solve, will not be conducive to their better life. With the gradual deepening of the research on elderly migrants, the language anxiety of elderly migrants has also attracted attention. Previous research mainly focuses on five fields: the relationship of language anxiety to language distance (language barriers), social integration, health, work, and socioeconomic status, and public service [14, 22, 23]. In other words, previous research largely attends to direct causes, influences, identity symbols, and general measures of elderly migrants' language anxiety. Among these aspects, language anxiety and language barriers, as well as influences of language anxiety have attracted marked scholarly attention.

2.4 The Present Study

Specific reasons and performance of elderly migrants' language anxiety and its impact on social integration, as well as measures of adjusting the language anxiety, have not been thoroughly discussed. To this end, this paper focuses on the following questions.

RQ1: What are the reasons for elderly migrants' language barriers and language anxiety?

RQ2: How does language anxiety impact elderly migrants' social integration?

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

Convenience sampling was conducted from the surrounding area, with two criteria "elderly + migrant". We get the contact information through the researcher's family members and then make an appointment for an interview. Two couples participated in this study. Both couples are from Liulin County, Shanxi Province. Among them, one couple (wife 61 years old and husband 66 years old) moved to Tianjin to take care of their grandchildren. The husband has stayed there for two years and the wife for five years. The other couple (wife 51 years old and husband 57 years old) moved to Beijing five years ago for work. In addition, the couple in Tianjin were previously self-employed, and the couple in Beijing were farmers. They all have given their informed consent to participate in this study.

3.2 Instruments and Procedure

This study mainly relies on interviews, which covered four main aspects: 1) personal background, 2) causes of language anxiety among elderly migrants, 3) the relationship between Mandarin proficiency and anxiety among elderly migrants, 4) the relationship between language anxiety and social integration, and feasible measures for social integration issues. We conducted the interview via video conference, with the entire session being recorded, lasting between one to one and a half hours. Additionally, we chose to conduct the interviews in dialects to allow the interviewees to express themselves more freely. "After the interview, to assess the interviewee's proficiency in Mandarin, we conducted a monologue test in Mandarin." The topic of the monologue was "My Hometown," with one minute for preparation and 1-3 minutes for the presentation. Similarly, this was conducted via video conference and recorded in dialect. After the monologue, we sought feedback from listeners who were not native speakers of the Liulin dialect and were from southern Shanxi (majoring in Chinese Language and Literature, with a Mandarin proficiency level of second-class A). The feedback focused mainly on the interviewee's linguistic features (pronunciation and intonation, vocabulary and grammar, fluency, and coherence) and non-linguistic features (facial expressions, eye contact, etc.).

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis mainly involved thematic analysis of the interviews. We first familiarized ourselves with the data by transcribing the recording and repeatedly reading the transcripts. Then we moved on to the coding phase, identifying a total of 10 codes: 1) interviewees' individual background, 2) speaking and communication, 3) performance and psychology before, during, and after Mandarin practice, 4) writing

and communication, 5) listening and communication, 6) occasion and communication, 7) causes of language anxiety, 8) language anxiety and social integration, 9) measures by individuals, families, communities, and governments to promote social integration, 10) suggestions for improving oral proficiency. After integrating these codes, we determined that the interviews generated 7 themes in total. Among them, three themes are related to research question 1: 1) interviewees' individual background, 2) Mandarin and anxiety, and 3) communication. Two themes are related to research question 2: 1) language anxiety and social integration, 2) measures. After reviewing the themes, we finally defined and named the themes: 1) individual background, 2) Mandarin and anxiety, 3) linguistic landscapes and related factors in communication, 4) language anxiety and social integration, and 5) measures implemented to promote the social integration of elderly migrants.

Data analysis naturally includes both monologue data and listener feedback data. When the interviewee is speaking in monologue, they mainly elaborate on their hometown's geographical location, local specialties, architecture, and notable figures. We record audio while noting the interviewee's state during their monologue, thereby summarizing the key points that require feedback from the listener. After receiving the listener's feedback, we further analyze the interviewee's Mandarin proficiency and language barriers through specific examples.

3.4 Results and Discussion

RQ1: Reasons for elderly migrants' language barriers and language anxiety

Interviewees' individual background

In the individual backgrounds of the interviewees, aspects such as household registration, age, occupation, level of education, and language situation were clarified, providing a basic perspective and basis for the causes of language anxiety among elderly migrants. Their background determines whether there are barriers to their communication. We believe that the subjective conditions individuals possess, as well as the objective conditions they face, will provide direction for their communication with others. Mandarin and anxiety

After a comprehensive analysis of the interview and monologue data, we found that the most direct cause of language barriers and language anxiety among elderly migrants is their low proficiency in Mandarin. In the process of learning and using Mandarin, elderly migrants showed communication barriers in aspects such as phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. The interviewees believed that the biggest difference between them and the locals was in their accents. The differences in Mandarin and dialectal word choices most affected by Mandarin are also reflected in everyday items such as food. The differences in grammar were not very noticeable. They also believed it was difficult to distinguish which aspect (accent, lexis, and grammar) changed first or had the first impact on their phonetic system. Specifically, the communication barriers in phonetics mainly manifested in the pronunciation of initials, finals, and tones. For example, the inability to distinguish between [ts] and [tɕ], [f] and [x], the front and back nasal sounds, the existence of entering tone rhymes and entering tones, and incorrect tonal pitch. The communication barriers in

vocabulary mainly manifested in two aspects: one was the correspondence between dialectal words and Mandarin words, and the other was the respondents' insufficient understanding of the special meanings of the speaker's dialectal words. For example, [sæ44iau53] and [tʰu312tou53], "niangmen [niaŋ24mən0]" (which is just a term of address, but the interviewees initially thought it was a derogatory term). The communication barriers in grammar were not very obvious. In the Liulin dialect, there are no special sentence structures. However, there are unique uses of suffixes, reduplication, split syllables, and some function words. These results coincide with the existing conclusions that the causes of language barriers and language anxiety among elderly migrants result from low Mandarin proficiency and interference from dialects [5, 13, 14].

Linguistic landscapes and related factors in communication

As for related factors of linguistic landscapes, such as text, signs, and other multimodal language landscapes, their impact on the communication of elderly migrants is relatively small. Interviewees from Tianjin, due to the inconvenience of communication and the busyness of their children's work, hardly have time to go out alone and reach places that require an understanding of multimodal language. Interviewees from Beijing indicated that currently, signs and the like are mostly represented by arrows, with a small proportion of text and all simple Chinese characters, so in most cases, they can understand the signs. The role of text itself in the communication process is also minimal. Listening and speaking play an important role in the communication process. All four interviewees stated that during the exchange process, the speaker's speed and rhythm directly determine whether they can understand. Whether the language spoken by the speaker is Mandarin and whether it has profound meanings is also crucial for their communication. Due to the tight schedule, the frequency of going out, and the setting of signs and the like, the impact of the interviewees by language landscapes and the like is not significant. Unless influenced by the nature of work and the like, the interviewees' dependence on text is minimal. On the contrary, listening and speaking have a greater impact on communication.

RQ2: Impact of language anxiety on elderly migrants' social integration

Language anxiety and social integration

Based on the interview data, we found that the degree of language anxiety among elderly migrants is positively correlated with social integration. The interviewees all pointed out the relationship between language anxiety and social integration, and in the process of communication, they gradually adjusted their state to better integrate into the local community. In the process of gradually adjusting their communication with others, the interviewees went from "zero communication" to being passively persuaded to learn to speak Mandarin, then to trying to greet people around them, and finally daring to speak Mandarin outside. It is precisely because they boldly tried to learn and speak Mandarin that the interviewees' language anxiety was alleviated, allowing them to gradually integrate into the local community.

Measures to promote the social integration of elderly migrants

Individuals, aside from considering alleviating language anxiety to promote social integration, do not think about or pay attention to how they should integrate into the local community in other aspects, nor do they consider what measures communities,

governments, and the state should implement to facilitate the social integration of elderly migrants. It is worth noting that they do not mind their identity as outsiders, but they are not particularly active in integrating into the local area, either. Except for a male interviewee who left Tianjin after three years of migration, all interviewees have been living in the place of immigration for more than five years, but they are still unwilling to actively communicate with others in Mandarin. The interviewees ultimately did not find a sense of belonging in the place of immigration and will eventually return to their hometown for old age. All of this is sufficient to illustrate that compared to the foreign population that fully integrates into local life, the interviewees' integration is more passive, incomplete, and superficial.

4 Conclusions

Elderly migrants often face a variety of challenges in their new locations, including anxiety caused by language barriers. We explored their language anxiety and social integration, exploring the causes of language anxiety and the relationship between language anxiety and social integration. We find that: 1) Language anxiety among the elderly migrants is not only related to individual backgrounds but also their Mandarin proficiency and abilities in listening, speaking, and writing during communication. 2) Language anxiety among elderly migrants is positively correlated with social integration. To better alleviate the anxiety caused by language barriers, elderly migrants should learn Mandarin and improve their proficiency. After their Mandarin skills are enhanced, their language communication will become more natural, and they will integrate into the local community better.

The study has practical significance. 1) It provides a new perspective for future research on elderly migrants. 2) Elderly migrants often lack a holistic view when dealing with language anxiety and social integration issues, which is something we need to overcome and pay attention to in our future research. 3) The experiences of elderly migrants themselves may play a very important role in their communication.

Despite breakthroughs, there are still some issues that merit our contemplation: 1) Dialects and Mandarin influence each other, but we do not know which system changes first in the overall phonological structure. Although the interview data does not provide a clear sequence, this is undoubtedly still a breakthrough point worth our continued attention. 2) Although elderly migrants recognize the relationship between language anxiety and social integration, how does the alleviation of language anxiety more specifically affect the social integration of elderly migrants? This is worth further thinking about how to better promote the social integration of elderly migrants from the perspective of language anxiety, and how the community and the country should implement policies, and enhance the willingness of elderly migrants to integrate.

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