Language Barriers of Overseas Students in Acculturation Experience: A Literature Review

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Abstract: As globalization continues to foster increased mobility of students across borders, the acculturation process becomes a crucial aspect of their educational journey. Language proficiency plays a pivotal role in facilitating academic success, effective communication, mental health, and social integration. This review synthesizes existing research to examine the various dimensions of language barriers faced by overseas students during their acculturation experience, including language proficiency, communication difficulties, and the psychological toll of navigating a foreign linguistic environment. Furthermore, the review discusses potential strategies and interventions to support these students in overcoming language barriers and enhancing their acculturation experience. By identifying key themes and trends in the literature, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between language barriers and the acculturation process among overseas students.

Keywords: overseas students, language barriers, acculturation experience, international education, language proficiency

1. Introduction

Globalization has significantly reshaped the dynamics of international education. Data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicated that the number of international students in OECD countries reached nearly 6.1 million in 2020, an increase of 70% over the past decade [1]. These students cross national borders to enhance intercultural and academic competence. However, there are many challenges in unfamiliar environments that prevent them from fully experiencing and benefiting from the acculturation process [2]. Acculturation is commonly used to discuss the experiences of social outsiders exposed to the host culture. In the context of education, international students are often referred to as sojourners and are one of the subjects of acculturation research [3].

While previous literature has identified challenges including language, communication, educational, social, and psychological barriers, few studies have specifically examined the role of language barriers in the acculturation experience of international students, or its interrelationship with other factors [4-6]. This is important because language contributes to social interaction, cultural understanding, and community integration [7]. Therefore, this paper presents a systematic review of language barriers in the acculturation of international students, focusing on language proficiency, psychological barriers, and communication barriers. These findings are expected to assist

international students in the acculturation process and guide universities in creating an inclusive and supportive environment for their academic and personal growth.

2. Definition and Model of Acculturation

Before delving into the intricate impact of language barriers on international students, it is crucial to cultivate a profound understanding of acculturation and related models of strategy. Acculturation was first introduced by Powell in 1880 and originally described the psychological shifts resulting from cross-cultural interaction between individuals and groups with diverse backgrounds [8]. A more formal and widely used definition was later proposed by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits, who defined acculturation as the subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups when direct contact happens between different groups [9]. Based on this, an acculturation framework was developed to examine the concept in depth. At the group level, acculturation was perceived as a phenomenon involving changes among groups over time. This perspective highlights continuous exchange between distinct cultures and bidirectional influence, though often dominated by one group [10]. This approach also acknowledges that constant contact can lead to internal transformation. When people grapple with issues of identity and group belonging, this cultural transformation occurs individually, namely psychological shifts in attitudes, values, and identities [11-12].

These seminal concepts have paved the way for many acculturation models. One of the most influential and widely used acculturation models is Berry's bidimensional model, which proposes four acculturation strategies based on the tension between maintaining original cultural identity and integrating into the dominant culture: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Integration refers to individuals who seek to maintain their own cultural identity while also actively participating in the host culture, displaying a strong sense of bicultural identity. On the other hand, assimilation describes individuals who strive to assimilate fully into the dominant culture at the cost of their original identity. Separation represents individuals who choose to retain their original cultural identity and avoid interaction with the dominant culture. They resist acculturation and strive to maintain their cultural boundaries. Conversely, marginalization refers to individuals who neither maintain their original cultural identity nor seek interaction with the dominant culture, and often feel disconnected and excluded from both cultures [13]. This model has proved invaluable in understanding the different ways in which individuals and groups cope with the complexities of acculturation and providing insights into the positive environments that host societies create for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

3. Component of Language Barriers

Exploring language barriers among international students requires an understanding of their interconnected components, and scholars offered different interpretations of this issue. Vetrova defines the language barrier as ineffective communication due to incorrect coding or misinterpretation of the transmitted message [14]. Furthermore, Freud et al. investigated psychological factors contributing to the phenomenon of interpersonal communication, and found that language proficiency limitations, psychological barriers, and communication hindrances are key aspects [15].

3.1. Language Proficiency Barriers

Language proficiency barriers are one specific aspect that contributes to the overall phenomenon of language barriers, which include pronunciation differences, uncertain language structure, and limited vocabulary. When individuals face issues with pronunciation or intonation, it can lead to misunderstandings and hinder successful communication with native speakers [16]. Similarly,

struggles with grammar, sentence construction, and syntax can cause confusion and misinterpretation of messages, further impeding their ability to express themselves clearly [17]. Moreover, a lack of familiarity with idiomatic expressions and limited vocabulary can pose additional challenges to understanding and being understood [18-19].

The impact of language proficiency barriers on the lives of international students in the host society is profound. Academically, language challenges may affect their performance, prevent them from actively participating in class discussions, and limit their comprehension of course material [20]. Socially, language barriers can prevent them from forming meaningful connections with their peers and participating in extracurricular activities, leading to feelings of isolation and social exclusion [20-21]. Outside of college, these barriers may affect their ability to handle daily life, such as interacting with local shopkeepers or seeking assistance in various situations [21]. Therefore, addressing language proficiency barriers is essential to enhance overall communication competence and facilitate smoother acculturation for international students.

3.2. Psychological Barriers

The presence of psychological barriers plays a crucial role in the emergence of language barriers for international students in foreign language contexts [19]. One of the primary psychological challenges is language learning anxiety, which refers to the fear and uneasiness experienced when attempting to use the target language [22]. This anxiety can arise from the fear of making mistakes, being judged by others, or feeling inadequate in comparison to native speakers. Additionally, a lack of self-confidence is another significant factor. Students may doubt their ability to communicate naturally and efficiently in the host language [23]. Since they worry about negative evaluation, social embarrassment, and self-image destruction, they tend to avoid participating in conversations or engaging in language practice [22].

Psychological difficulties can directly lead to a significant decrease in students' self-esteem and self-efficacy [24]. This may cause them to avoid classroom activities such as group discussions and oral presentations, missing out on valuable communication opportunities [25]. As a result, learners may fail to practice and apply their language skills in real-life situations, further exacerbating the language barrier. Moreover, psychological difficulties can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration [26]. Such a negative trend can reduce their enthusiasm for learning a foreign language and limit their willingness to use the language, thus hindering their progress in mastering it [22]. There is no doubt that these psychological challenges can have long-term effects on international students' language proficiency and adaptation to the new cultural environment. Addressing these psychological barriers is essential to mitigate their adverse effects on language learning and acculturation.

3.3. Communication Barriers

Communication sets the stage for language barriers in the process of acculturation, and an important reason for the occurrence of language barriers is the interplay of various communication-related factors such as communication motivation, frequency, as well as environment.

3.3.1. Communication Motivation

Communication motivation reflects individuals' willingness to engage in language interactions. Research suggests international students often prefer socializing within their familiar cultural group, which shares similar norms, language proficiency, and acculturation experiences, for comfort and belonging [27]. However, this inclination inadvertently reduces their need to interact with members of the host culture and their motivation to improve language proficiency [22]. Meanwhile, communication frequency is also influenced because opportunities for authentic communication

environments are scarce. Only regular and consistent language practice makes students more comfortable and proficient in a foreign language [28].

3.3.2. Discrimination or Prejudice

A hostile communication environment that arises from discrimination or prejudice also contributes to the language barrier for international students [29]. Discrimination can manifest in various ways, such as xenophobia, racism, or linguistic prejudice, all directed towards individuals from different cultural backgrounds or with accents perceived as foreign [30]. For instance, linguistic discrimination can stigmatize certain accents or non-native proficiency levels. Students may face criticism or ridicule for their pronunciation or grammar errors. Except for that, experiencing discrimination or stereotypes based on linguistic or cultural identity can lead to feelings of exclusion and marginalization [30]. Such negative experiences can affect their communication motivation and self-confidence, making them hesitant to engage in language interactions and practice, or even escape target language interactions [29].

4. Strategies for Language Barriers

4.1. Self-adjusting

Self-adjustment strategies for language barriers involve two key aspects: improvement of language proficiency and emotional self-regulation through affirmation.

To improve language skills, international students can engage in self-directed learning and participate in language workshops or clubs for language exposure and practice [24]. Exposure to different linguistic contexts and immersion in the target language environment can help foster second language confidence and overcome language barriers [31]. Moreover, language learning resources such as related online courses, books, movies, and podcasts can aid in self-study as they offer additional opportunities to practice and reinforce language skills [24]. Gradual improvement in language proficiency can facilitate better communication and integration into the host society.

In addition, addressing negative emotions such as frustration, anxiety, and self-doubt due to language barriers is also necessary. Positive self-talk and affirmation of progress and efforts in language proficiency can provide international students with fulfillment, and help them increase their language confidence as well as motivation for language learning [24]. Seeking support from friends, family, or counseling services is also suggested to release emotions and receive encouragement [32]. Through self-directed learning and positive self-affirmations, international students can effectively address language barriers and embrace their acculturation journey smoothly with confidence and determination.

4.2. Social Support Networking

International students benefit from bonds within their conational circles, where shared language and background allow for the mutual exchange of adaptation experiences and strategies, aiding their transition into the host society. Interactions with compatriots create a secure, supportive space for international students to overcome language barriers more effectively without fear of judgement or misunderstanding. Besides, these relationships can offer emotional comfort and practical support that alleviate the psychological stress from acculturation challenges [27].

However, relying solely on national networks hinders language growth and cross-cultural engagement. Effective integration requires active interaction with host community members, exposing students to genuine language use, cultural practices, and societal norms [33]. This can

improve their language skills, increase their confidence in communicating with the host community, and deepen their appreciation of the local culture [20].

Balancing the interaction with both groups is essential for effective acculturation. By actively participating in both circles, international students can develop a more comprehensive support network, break down language barriers, and enhance their overall acculturation experience.

4.3. University Resource

Universities, as central places of activities and interactions for international students, can implement effective strategies in three key aspects: language support programs, diversity promotion, and faculty involvement [34].

Research underscores the effectiveness of language support programs in improving language proficiency and reducing language barriers for international students [34]. They should encompass tailored courses providing targeted instruction in speaking, listening, reading, and writing [35]. Also, one-on-one tutoring, language workshops, and exchanges with native speakers or fellow learners should be integral [34].

Moreover, promoting diversity and inclusion is crucial for creating a welcoming atmosphere that counters discriminatory behaviors. Universities can arrange cultural events and student gatherings to encourage cross-cultural interactions and understanding [35]. When international students feel accepted and included, they are more likely to engage in social interactions with host members. This positive dynamic can effectively break down language barriers and enhance acculturation outcomes for international students.

Finally, faculty involvement is equally vital in addressing language barriers. Research affirms that faculty understanding and support significantly impact language development and academic success. Inclusive teaching methods include clear instructions, visual aids, and active class participation encouragement. Faculty need to be mindful of language-related challenges faced by international students and offer additional support as needed [34].

5. Conclusion

This review delved into the prominent challenge of language barriers during the acculturation process of international students, aiming to provide valuable insights into the complexities and challenges they face when adapting to a new cultural environment. The review highlighted the significance of language proficiency and revealed many issues with language barriers in three main components: language proficiency, psychological barriers, and communication barriers. These barriers further lead to adaptive challenges, which directly influence the acculturation experience of international students. Furthermore, the review provided corresponding suggestions to make the acculturation journey smoother for international students, such as targeted language support programs, social support network construction, and efforts by faculty.

Nevertheless, the review identified gaps in existing research, indicating a need for further exploration of how language barriers intertwine with other factors affecting acculturation. Future studies could explore the effectiveness of specific language support interventions in enhancing students' language proficiency and overall acculturation outcomes. These insights from this review have significant implications for enhancing international students' acculturation experiences and promoting their academic and personal growth in a foreign cultural context.

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