

Language Barriers:

Exploring its Effects on the Individual

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## ABSTRACT

From everyday life to personal affairs, Language Barriers have negatively affected the lives of various individuals all around the world. The surge of immigrants brought great diversity in every country, but those individuals have faced severe backlash from Language Barriers. Language has an astronomical effect on communication as a whole, and when miscommunication occurs, it can lead to depression, anxiety, shame, and possibly violence in some scenarios. These issues that stem from Language Barriers will continue unless society becomes educated on understanding and creating methods that will benefit the individual who experiences Language Barriers.

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is the most important tool for everyday life. Ever since birth, children are taught to learn their native language just like how humans are designed to walk. Any child around the world is capable of learning any language that they are exposed to. However, every child is different and they may not be able to pick up their native language. Language barriers are important because they are often an impediment to building relationships with others. Not working out language barriers can lead to violence, depression, frustration, and conflict. It can be very time-consuming to

try and mend relationships that experience such language barriers. It feels as if these issues are not represented or noticed enough for everyone in the world to understand. Serious language barriers can negatively affect an individual, and that person needs to express their emotions without any fear of judgment and anxiety. Speaking on these issues will not only allow others to relate and empathize, but it will also bring knowledge and a better understanding of language barriers and their effects on the individual.

Expressing emotions to those who don't understand your language can be very irritating at times. It makes the individual feel unheard and insignificant. One study analyzed the progress and emotional statuses of international students who face strong language barriers. Glory Gatwiri found in her studies that five themes emerged from the analysis: "sense of loss, cultural stress, language barriers, social support, emotions, and physical state.... There seems to be a relationship between not being able to communicate effectively (understanding what others say and being understood) and measures of mental health... failure to achieve this level of communication may lead to negative psychosocial consequences for international students that seriously interfere with their adaptation to the host country and their capacity to achieve optimally in the university setting" (Gatwiri,2). International students experience many language barriers with the students and professors they interact with. On a day-to-day basis, they are constantly anxious and insecure about their ability to speak the native language in their environment. "All participants said they felt that their communication skills were intimately tied to their levels of cultural stress, academic difficulty, and emotions such as sadness, hopelessness, and disappointment. A major source of most of their frustration

stemmed from the fact that they could not communicate effectively” (Gatwiri,2). On the other hand, another significant trend was noticed in another study. Jungeun Lee, a graduate of the University of Florida, created a study on international studies to describe their stress and coping experiences due to their language barriers. In his research, he found that language barriers heavily affect the individual’s social life. Interacting with other students became a significant obstacle for those who want to connect with others. “Language barriers also affected participants’ interactions with American classmates in less formal situations. They found themselves less active and initiative with American students than with their co-national students or other international students.” As Anne explained, “I notice the difference because I can communicate easily and happily with Chinese students. It’s not like I don’t want to talk to American students. I don’t want to make mistakes” (Lee, 71). A feeling of inferiority was common among these students. Especially with international students, individuals who do not understand the issues that coincide with language barriers make it more difficult for those who are attempting to assimilate into their new environment. When different cultures and languages collide, it can lead to negative repercussions on both sides. Overcoming these issues become more and more difficult to resolve.

In addition to the analysis of international students, Takahiro Sato and Samuel R. Hodge created a study to examine and identify the views of exchange students from Asia about their academic and social experiences in an American University. They sent out demographic surveys and conducted two semi-structured interviews for the international students. One major discrepancy between the exchange students and the

American students was the intent to create relationships with each other. “They had stranger anxiety called “hitomishiri”, which means they were reserved around people they did know “ (Sato & Hodge, 213). Many international students express this behavior, which makes it difficult to overcome language barriers. “However, Participants observed American students and realized that those who expressed an interest in Japanese culture were most dependable and friendly” (Sato & Hodge, 215).

However, language barriers do not stop at schools or universities. It can affect any type of environment, which makes it difficult for any individual. Ellen Eun Kyoo Kim and Anna S. Matilla conducted a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Strauss and Corbin, 1990). They constructed face-to-face interviews with 9 Korean participants and each was given 15 questions regarding the individual’s experiences in U.S restaurants. These questions consisted of the individual’s interactions with “service providers, service failures and complaint experiences, overall satisfaction, and intention to return” (Kim & Matilla,3). All of the servers were American. As a result, all of the participants had a similar issue amongst each other. They all had difficulty responding and answering simple questions/requests, which heavily affected their emotional wellbeing. “Emotional responses that ESL Korean customers experienced most frequently were anxiety, fear, and embarrassment. They were anxious due to a lack of knowledge such as not knowing the type of food, or not knowing what to answer when servers asked questions. Their cognitive response was mainly confusion which comes from not knowing how to react to unexpected situations or when they don’t understand what the servers were saying ” (Kim & Matilla, 5). Another significant aspect of this experiment is the cultural difference between the

Korean customers and the American servers. The “American style” of the servers made the Korean customers very confused. The customers mentioned that the servers were too casual and not formal enough. Kim and Matilla mention a term called “power distance,” which is more familiar with Koreans than Americans. “Power distance is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” ([www.hofstede-insights.com](http://www.hofstede-insights.com),1). In Korean society, there is a high power distance present in the culture. Many Korean customers around the world believe that the individuals who work in the food industry have a higher significance than those who work in front-line service providers (Matilla, 1999, 5). Especially for Koreans, English is a very unique language. It has many nuances and other specific words that do not fit within the Korean language. In Korean schools, it is required for students to learn English and when those individuals are not able to properly speak English, it creates a type of shame and embarrassment and negatively affects their pride. Korean culture has always been heavily emphasized by the success of a person’s intellect and academia. Social pressure can further negatively affect the individual’s mental wellbeing and could bring disgrace to their friends and family. Regarding the responses from the Korean customers, Kim and Matilla state: “The interviewees were afraid that they were going to be embarrassed in front of the server or their friends, and embarrassment is the emotion they experienced when they lost face” (5).

The negative effects of language barriers are often connected with the individual’s culture. For many, the ability to speak one’s native language is equivalent to

one's pride. When an individual is facing a harsh language barrier. It can heavily affect the people around them. A common theme for those who experience this often bottles up their emotion, because they do not have a proper outlet to express their emotions. For those who try to seek mental health assistance, the stigma that originates from the individual's culture can hinder them from seeking help. Kimberly Joy Steiner conducted a study on Korean Americans and their underutilization of mental health services. Questionnaires were sent to non-client Korean Americans to examine and understand factors affecting the underutilization of mental health services. One of the main reasons is the difference of cultures. "Asians, in general, view the restraint of emotions as a sign of maturity while western-trained counselors may view the emotional expression as being healthy (Kim, 1996). Asian culture emphasizes compliance with professionals. Therefore, Koreans may appear passive or uninterested" (Steiner, 35). Repression is viewed as a sign of strength and maturity. Many Korean Americans from the previous generation grew up in an environment where they either did not have time to consider their emotional health or simply convinced themselves of not needing mental health services. Also, there were not a lot of mental health services available during that time. Now, there is an abundance of professionals who can help treat individuals, but as previously mentioned, Korean Americans still underutilize those services. Another reason is because of language barriers. "An article written by Sue and Sue (1977) studied the language barriers of an Asian American in a counseling relationship. An individual's class status may directly affect the individual's ability to understand an English-speaking therapist. A Korean American's inability to express their need verbally may lead to a false impression about him or her. Minorities, in general, may feel inferior

and were seen as lacking in awareness and conceptual thinking” (Steiner, 36). With everything considered, there is a possibility that the usual method of treating individuals with mental health issues is not effective for Korean Americans and other Asian ethnicities. Perhaps another method of therapy can be effective. As a result of this study, Kimberly Joy Steiner mentioned some methods that can help Korean Americans and other Asian ethnicities be more open to mental health services. “Educating Korean American individuals and their families about mental health problems may help lead to increased mental health utilization. It is not enough for a social worker to be educated about mental health problems within the Korean American community. It requires a social worker to understand that while the barriers such as language, stigma, and shame exist, Korean Americans may not know where to obtain services” (Steiner, 56). Studies show that most Korean Americans do not turn to mental health services because they believe they can handle it themselves. This mindset heavily coincides with the cultural stigmas that many Korean Americans are taught at an early age. Steiner also mentions: “Cultural competency should be required for programs providing services to better meet the mental health needs of the Korean American community. Social workers need to provide outreach to Korean Americans. Attendance at religious and spiritual gatherings, community centers, schools, and cultural festivals within the community may educate and help promote utilization of mental health services for Korean Americans” (56).

“Language is the most powerful tool of communication. Its function includes the: communication of ideas, thoughts, opinion and emotional expression, social interaction,

using the power of sound, recording facts, expression of identity. However, at the same time, a common barrier to effective communication. Language or semantic barriers arise when many words have more than one meaning, and a sender and a receiver try to communicate in a language, which themselves do not understand properly” (I.A.S BUARQOUB, 1). One’s experience with language barriers is unique to their own. However, various emotions and problems that are common for those who experience harsh language barriers. Everyday life with a language barrier is no easy task. Everything is affected, ranging from simple conversation/requests to intimate conversation with those we love and care about. It is imperative to understand the hardships that come with language barriers. We as a collective must help those feel welcomed and to make sure they can express themselves without fear, anxiety, or embarrassment. Mental Health services are going to evolve, and in the future, those services will be able to help individuals affected by language barriers with new methods of therapy. Over time, cultures will change and perhaps the stigma behind utilizing mental health services will eventually dissipate. The new generation will usher in a new era that will overcome language barriers.

### "A NEW PERSPECTIVE"

Researching the effects of language barriers in society and the workforce was very eye-opening for me. It seems that my situation is completely different from those who experience this in everyday life. My issues are connected to an enclosed

environment, while the people I encountered through research are in an open environment, meaning that almost everything they see and experience has been altered due to their preconceived knowledge of wherever they originated from. It seems that this trend is very common in immigrants and their families. My parents immigrated from South Korea to America around the 1970s. They had almost zero knowledge of the English language and very little money. They were able to survive in their new environment and have a family. I can't imagine the language barriers and hardships they had to endure. In reality, their experience with language barriers has been much more harsh and unforgiving than mine and to this day they still have issues with their customers. The jewelry shop they own in Washington Heights is a Spanish-speaking dominant area, and so not only did they have to learn English, but they had to also learn Spanish. My parents are truly tenacious for enduring so many hardships to get to where they are now.



I was born in America and grew up in a white-dominant neighborhood. I never had any knowledge of my Korean culture and I had to learn that as I grew up. I always felt some type of disconnect between me and my Korean culture. I remember the times I would go to countless Korean ceremonies and have the absolute time of my life. I met so many new friends and family members along the way, and I would give anything in my life to relive those days.



However as time went on, my family couldn't take the time to attend these events. Life grew more complicated and the reality of my situation became worse over time. I couldn't master the Korean language at a young age, which made me unable to communicate properly with my parents. Our conversations would always lead to confusion and sometimes end up in a heated argument. My siblings learned the language and always had to translate between me and my parents. It was frustrating. I never felt heard nor understood by the people who I was supposed to trust and love unconditionally. Whenever I reflect upon my childhood, I feel ashamed and

embarrassed by the constant annoyance I would bring upon my parents. I was such a rebellious kid, always not listening nor paying attention to my parents. They never understood me, so why should I even try to understand them? That type of mindset corrupted my perspective at such a young age, and I regret bringing so much trouble upon my parents.

### “EXPERIENCE MAY VARY”

The effects of language barriers can be very complex to describe. Everyone's situation is always unique and different. Some can easily fix their language barrier, while others would have to take years and years out of their lives to try and mend their situation. My current situation is the reason why I say fixing language barriers can be a very difficult journey for some. As of now, the relationship between me and my parents is much better than before. Coronavirus has brought us a lot of fear and worrisome times. We were very worried about the jewelry store and how it was going to survive in this pandemic. My parents work seven days a week, and I can't remember the last time they had to take a break. They are hard workers, and missing a day is equivalent to the end of the world. When the coronavirus was ramping up, my parents had to stay home for almost a month. It was very difficult for them to try and remain calm. The store was always on their minds, and I had intervened to help them adjust to home life. As time went on, they were able to accept the fact that everyone else is going through the same situation. Religion was their main coping mechanism during the pandemic. I'm not religious myself, but they still forced me into their praying sessions. I never enjoyed it,

and everything they said was in Korean so I felt like some background character in some film cutscene. However, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We were able to bond more, and have intimate conversations about our past lives, emotional baggage, and other personal topics. Initially, there was a lot of confusion, due to the language barriers we have, but over time I was able to express my emotions through very simple English. They did the same to me for the Korean language. I want to believe that this period of my life was the turning point of our relationship. But then again, I'm still very young and I'm sure that the future will be bright for us.

To a certain extent, we have grown to understand each other and our intentions. My parents can speak a little English, and although I cannot speak Korean fluently, I've grown to be able to understand a little bit of Korean. As we both grow older, I hope that our relationship will continue to improve. Although this sounds great, the process of reaching this point took many years to accomplish. Countless arguments, screaming, crying, and sacrifices occurred for us to reach this point. I don't know if it was worth the effort, but a part of me is happy that we were able to endure all of it.

My project is something I have been reflecting on for a very long time. Growing up, I never really had an outlet to express my emotions, and I would find myself curling up like a hedgehog for so many years. I would be that happy and funny kid that would just get by and make others laugh, while the inside of my mind would harbor so many emotions. I'm a sensitive individual, which would make it even more difficult to hide my emotions. At a certain point in my life, I was able to suppress these feelings and somewhat forget about them. At the time it saved me from situations with my parents that would lead to more arguments and screaming bouts. But, the negative effects of

suppressing myself began to show themselves. My emotions would start flowing out, with no knowledge as to why I felt this way. I would end up being dependent on others to try and fix my mental state. I would spend so much time trying to make new friends because I knew those friends would be able to make me laugh and forget about my issues. I realized that I needed to change. This method of coping was not sustainable, nor did it benefit the people around me. Fortunately, a new environment was all I needed to cultivate change.



### A NEW BEGINNING

When college came around, my perspective started to change. It was a clean slate for me and it felt very refreshing to spend some time by myself. I was worried that I

would not be able to make some new friends, but I was lucky enough to meet a lot of good people in my dorm. They were completely different from the people I was familiar with at home, and it was very relieving to experience such amazing moments with my new friends. However, I caught myself repeating the same situation that I have been doing for so many years. My friends told me to start being more kind to myself. I realized that I had a pattern of self-doubt and constantly bringing myself down when it wasn't necessary. Whenever I would feel down, I would berate myself in a way where I thought would keep me grounded and "humble." I would swallow my pride for the benefit of the other person. I guess you could say that I was a hardcore people pleaser. I put others first and do not even think about taking care of myself. The term "self-care" was not in my mental vocabulary, and the thought of spending time to myself while others needed help just felt selfish to me. To this day, I'm still trying very hard to be more kind to myself. It's something that I will probably have to work on throughout my life, but I am much better now than before.

This project took a lot of trial and error. At first, my idea was to create a documentary about local businesses and how apps like Uber Eats and Doordash have affected them during the pandemic. Trying to plan interviews with the businesses near me and making sure no one had covid was very difficult. To mitigate some of the dangers of covid, I decided to make a documentary of my parent's jewelry shop. It's something that I am familiar with, and it would be a lot more accessible compared to the last idea. I already created a small documentary on the shop for a class I took last semester, so I figured it would be natural for me to make a fully fleshed-out film. Unfortunately, after planning out my time with the store hours and academics, it would

not work out. For a third time, I changed my idea again to create a documentary about my grandmother and the cultural/generational gaps between her and me. I was a home care helper at the time, and for a while, this project seemed possible. After a month or two, taking care of my grandmother started to ramp up. Since my parents were at work 7 days a week, the maintenance became too much for me, physically and mentally. My last semester came along, and it became almost impossible to balance both academics and being a home care helper. Unfortunately, her health started to decline rapidly and she had to be placed in an elderly home. Coronavirus made it pretty impossible for me to see her, so I had to scratch the project as a whole and start fresh again.

At this point, I was starting to lose hope. Meeting expectations seemed impossible, and at times the pressure would get to me. A lot of frustration and hopelessness flooded my mind, and it just all seemed too difficult. Surprisingly, one night I was on the computer watching a video and out of nowhere, the idea of creating an experimental film about my experience with language barriers came up. I don't know how this idea came to fruition, but staying at home gave me a lot of time to myself and I reflected on my life as a whole. A lot of self-loathing took place, but while I was deep in thought, I started to think about my relationship with the Korean culture. I was more involved as a kid, but as time went on the disconnect grew wider. A part of me wanted to reconnect with the Korean culture but it felt too overwhelming for me, and I had no idea where to start. I had all of these doubts and concerns about my identity and I was terrified if I was going to be accepted by the Korean community. One major issue I had was my inability to speak Korean fluently. I kept saying to myself: "If I spoke Korean fluently, things would probably have changed for the best." This sentence would corrode

my mind for the longest time. It was one of the biggest things I was insecure about and I had to confront it. I have experienced these emotions for so long needed to be attacked head-on, instead of cowering behind and ignoring every negative emotion that comes my way. So, I started to brainstorm and create an experimental film that confronts my issues with language barriers, and the isolation I felt for so long. I wanted it to be an experimental film because I felt it would fit within the complexity of language barriers and how it affects everyone differently. The visuals I shot were all from the creek next to my house. I remember the times where I and my friends would have little creek adventures and explore the environment. Exploring the creek during the wintertime was the best. My memories of these events faded away over time and whenever I would think back to those times, it would be some convoluted jargon of memories that had to be put together like a puzzle piece.



The forgotten nostalgia was a very important theme, so I made sure that it had its place in my project. Another reason why I wanted to do my project about language barriers is that I used art as a way of expressing my emotions with no limits. Whenever I reflect on the past, I wish I was able to receive that support from my family. My family was always busy with work or school, so I was fairly alone throughout my childhood. My grandmother stayed at home with me, but just like my parents, she was only able to speak Korean. It took a long time for me to understand my parents. For the longest time, I felt like an outsider. It was time to come out of my shell and start experimenting with this film and most importantly, my emotions. I let go of any self-judgment and allowed myself to be vulnerable in front of the camera. At first, it felt very cringy and unnatural, but the more I practiced, then it became easier for me to put my emotions through the lens of the camera. It gave me a lot of confidence and vigor to keep on pushing and experimenting.

My film is nowhere near its completion since my experience with language barriers will continue to evolve in the future. I'd like to think that my film took a bite into an enormous sandwich. There are many things that I couldn't cover, mainly because I am still young. I want to grow and learn more about my culture and the deeper meaning behind language barriers. It is something that I have to deal with throughout my life. Just the thought of it feels very intimidating and hopefully, my physical and mental state will be formidable in the future. Fortunately, life is full of unexpected events and I'm happy to say that I am ready for any obstacle that comes my way. I am extremely thankful to the professors that have helped me throughout this process. It was mentally draining to

confront my past and being extremely vulnerable in front of the camera. If it wasn't for the reassurance my professors gave me, I don't know if I would have the confidence that I have today. The amount of support I received from my friends and family was astronomical, and I am forever grateful for everything they have done for me.

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