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Language Barriers in Education and the Workplace: Effects on Performance, Communication and Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Language barriers can make it harder for people to learn, join activities, get jobs, and be recognized in education and work. Hence, this structured narrative review looks at peer-reviewed studies from 2013 - 2025 to understand how these language problems affect people in different settings. The studies were grouped into six areas. These include academic achievement and access to knowledge, participation and belonging, digital and clinical education, workplace communication, employment and safety, and then language discrimination. In education, problems can come from the language used in teaching, classroom communication, academic language, digital systems and lack of support. At work, language differences can affect trust, job opportunities, information sharing, skill use, safety reporting, and access to services. The review also found that language ability is not the only reason for these problems. Rules, communication systems and institutional practices also have an important role. Some approaches, such as language training, interpreting, multimodal teaching and digital support, can help. However, these approaches may have limited effect if only the learner or worker is expected to change. The review suggests that better language inclusion needs support for individuals together with changes in education, workplaces and institutional systems.

INTRODUCTION

Language barriers are not only an individual problem because schools and workplaces also decide which language skills are accepted as proper participation. In multinational teams, differences in a shared language can reduce trust between team members (Tenzer *et al.*, 2014). It can also affect how teams share and understand knowledge (Tenzer *et al.*, 2021). Company language rules may also influence the status of workers, even when they have strong professional skills (Neeley, 2013). In the labor market, better knowledge of the host-country language can improve access to employment (Nam *et al.*, 2025). Schmid (2023) also found that refugees had better employment chances when they were placed in regions where their language matched the local language.

In education, language barriers can come from the language used for teaching, academic writing, classroom communication and the support available to students. Writing centers can help students deal with institutional language expectations instead of only correcting their language problems (Kaufhold & Yencken, 2021). English ability has also been connected to differences in academic performance between international and local nursing students (Nasirudeen & Xiao, 2020). Doctoral students face language challenges because academic writing is tied to their discipline's rules and practices (Dai & Hardy, 2024). In English-medium higher education, students may also experience problems with identity and belonging when knowledge is mainly connected to one language (Joubert & Sibanda, 2022). Speaking anxiety can also stop students from taking part in class, even when they understand the

subject (Liu & Hong, 2021).

Language problems can become more difficult when they are connected with migration, race, religion, job position or legal status. Migrant professionals have reported language discrimination in both physical and online workplaces (Back & Piekkari, 2024). Language judgments can also be connected with religious identity and other forms of discrimination (Bakshi, 2024). Indonesian workers in Kuwait reported language discrimination, but they also developed ways to cope with these experiences (Ali *et al.*, 2025). Communication problems can also make it difficult for migrant workers to report accidents or apply for compensation (Yotwilai, 2024). In healthcare, trained interpreters are useful, but institutions do not always make these services available (Puthooppambal *et al.*, 2021).

Different interventions focus on different parts of the problem. Translanguaging can help students use more than one language and improve participation in English-medium classrooms (Sah & Li, 2024). Universal design can make online education easier to access for students with different language backgrounds (Emihovich, 2024). Digital language tools can help organizations with communication, although they may also create concerns about quality, privacy and differences in digital skills (Lauring *et al.*, 2025). Language training focused on employment can improve job opportunities for immigrants (Lang, 2022). Translation and interpreting services can also improve access for migrants, but they work better when they are properly included in institutional systems (Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025).

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This review therefore looks at how language barriers affect performance, communication and inclusion in education and workplaces. It also examines which solutions deal with the wider causes of language barriers instead of expecting only the individual speaker to change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Performance and Epistemic Access

Academic performance is shaped by how institutions encode disciplinary knowledge in language. Writing centers occupy a policy position between institutional expectations and multilingual students' academic practices (Kaufhold & Yencken, 2021). In elementary classrooms, instruction designed for multilingual learners can make higher-order thinking visible rather than treating language proficiency as a proxy for reasoning (Heffington & Coady, 2023). Scientific modeling becomes more accessible when learners can coordinate multilingual and multimodal resources (Pierson *et al.*, 2021). International doctoral students use spatial and translanguaging repertoires to navigate academic information literacy (Gao, 2023). Their access depends on genres, supervisory expectations and disciplinary conventions as much as conversational proficiency (Dai & Hardy, 2024).

Performance measures can hide the route through which language affects results. Nursing students educated through an additional language show performance differences associated with English skills (Nasirudeen & Xiao, 2020). Students' accounts from Basque multilingual education indicate that the experience of learning across Basque, Spanish and English varies by subject and instructional context (Orcasitas-Vicandi & Leonet, 2022). Gesture instruction can strengthen second-language academic presentations by adding a nonverbal resource to spoken delivery (Wang *et al.*, 2023). During distance learning, multilingual students faced access and communication barriers that teachers could not resolve through ordinary classroom supports (Gitschthaler *et al.*, 2022). Universal-design principles offer an alternative by building multiple routes to content and expression into online courses (Emihovich, 2024). These findings locate academic disadvantage in the interaction between language demands and task design.

Participation, Belonging and Educational Inclusion

Language determines whether learners can enter the social and epistemic life of an institution. South African students linked English-medium instruction with identity, belonging and access to disciplinary knowledge (Joubert & Sibanda, 2022). Chinese international students benefited from organized activities that created practical opportunities to cross linguistic and social boundaries (Ma, 2020). African international students learning Chinese described affective attunement as part of participation rather than an incidental emotion (Xu, 2024). Classroom comparison shows that translanguaging can expand learner participation by creating additional routes for questioning, explaining and responding (Nie *et*

al., 2024). Social-emotional translanguaging practices also allow multilingual learners to express experiences that monolingual routines can leave inaccessible (Song *et al.*, 2022).

Institutional communication extends participation beyond the classroom. Monolingual school websites exclude parents when essential information is not linguistically accessible (Piller *et al.*, 2023). Parent-teacher background similarity is associated with communication quality and barriers to engagement among ethnoculturally diverse families (Li *et al.*, 2023). School inclusion studies in France and New Zealand show that language support can enable participation while separate structures may reproduce marginalization (Smythe, 2024). Overseas-educated multilingual teacher candidates can be positioned as intellectually unequal when language difference is mistaken for limited professional knowledge (Han & Li, 2024). Critical translanguaging spaces contest that hierarchy by treating students' repertoires as resources for learning and identity work (Hamman-Ortiz, 2024). Inclusion is present when communication design changes access to authority, not only when multilingual learners are physically enrolled.

Digital, Vocational and Clinical Education

Digital and professional learning environments add specialized language demands to ordinary academic communication. A Canadian multilingual English program found that planned translanguaging generated pedagogical opportunities alongside implementation challenges for teachers and students (Galante, 2020). Occupational-therapy education illustrates how pedagogical translanguaging can counter monolingual norms that place multilingual students at risk of failure (Ramafikeng, 2024). Adult migrants in vocational healthcare education develop professional identities by moving across workplace, instructional and everyday linguistic repertoires (Mustonen & Strömmer, 2024). Minority-language representation in massive open online courses also affects whether digital participation is symbolically and practically inclusive (Mac Lochlainn *et al.*, 2023). Online boredom can arise from limited interaction, repetitive tasks and weak social presence, all of which intensify the burden of foreign-language learning (Shimray & Wangdi, 2023).

Clinical education exposes the consequences of language discordance in high-stakes communication. Medical students report that language barriers affect history taking, explanation, rapport and their ability to contribute to care (Durrani, 2024). Speaking anxiety can narrow classroom participation well before students enter professional practice (Liu & Hong, 2021). Selective translanguaging in English-medium instruction can preserve access to disciplinary concepts without abandoning development in the institutional language (Sah & Li, 2024). Clinical and vocational programs gain an additional equity test: whether assessment distinguishes professional reasoning from speed or confidence in an additional language. Evidence

from multilingual occupational-therapy students shows that legitimizing full repertoires can increase access to learning while preserving disciplinary goals (Ramafikeng,

2024). Digital platforms, simulations and placements require aligned language supports because a solution available in a lecture may disappear at the point of care.

Table 1: Education language-barrier pathways and matched responses

Barrier location	Mechanism	Observed outcome	Matched response	Source
Language of instruction	Concept knowledge is filtered through one authorized code	Reduced epistemic access & belonging	Selective translanguaging with explicit target-language development	Sah & Li(2024); Joubert & Sibanda (2022)
Academic genres	Unstated writing & information-literacy conventions	Delayed participation in disciplinary work	Writing support positioned as policy mediation	Kaufhold& Yencken (2021); Gao (2023)
Classroom interaction	Speaking anxiety & restricted response options	Knowledge remains less visible in discussion & assessment	Multimodal explanation, gesture, & translanguaging	Liu & Hong (2021); Wang <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Family communication	Monolingual websites & linguistic distance	Lower parent access & engagement	Multilingual information & reciprocal communication	Piller <i>et al.</i> (2023); Li <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Online course design	Text-heavy, asynchronous, or poorly supported interfaces	Access barriers, isolation, & boredom	Universal design & active multilingual interaction	Emihovich (2024); Shimray & Wangdi (2023)
Professional & clinical education	Specialized discourse & high-stakes encounters	Restricted clinical contribution & professional identity development	Task-specific language support, simulation, & interpreting access	Mustonen & Strömmer (2024); Durrani (2024)

Workplace Communication, Knowledge and Productivity

Workplace language barriers influence how expertise is exchanged and credited. Multinational-team research links linguistic asymmetry with lower trust when fluency is read as a signal of competence or similarity (Tenzer *et al.*, 2014). Later work shows that language barriers affect knowledge processing through participation, interpretation and integration rather than simple message transmission (Tenzer *et al.*, 2021). International research teams also report that language diversity changes willingness and ability to share knowledge (Canestrino *et al.*, 2022). Engineering graduates working through English as a business lingua franca describe gaps between university language preparation and transnational technical communication (Hodges & Seawright, 2023). In multilingual meetings, interactional practices can position a competent professional as a language learner and redirect attention from the work task (Kurahila *et al.*, 2023).

Organizational language policy distributes access to networks, brokerage and status. A common-language

mandate can produce status loss for nonnative speakers even when their technical contribution remains unchanged (Neeley, 2013). It can also create unearned status gains for native speakers whose linguistic advantage is mistaken for broader organizational competence (Neeley & Dumas, 2016). Language-sensitive recruitment improves knowledge transfer when multilingual employees connect organizational units, but brokerage demands can overload the same individuals (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2014). Heritage-language use among Korean immigrants in New Zealand shows that workplace repertoires also sustain identity and interpersonal connection (Park, 2021). Digital language-management systems can widen access to translation and documentation while changing who controls language quality, data and communicative visibility (Lauring *et al.*, 2025). Productivity gains depend on whose expertise reaches the decision and what linguistic labor remains unrecognized.

Employment, Professional Mobility and Safety

Host-language proficiency affects entry into employment and the use of prior qualifications. Administrative

evidence from Switzerland identifies employment gains when refugees' language matches the region of placement (Schmid, 2023). English proficiency and community language resources are also associated with immigrants' employment in Western New York (Nam *et al.*, 2025). Host-language limitations increase education–job mismatch, leaving qualified migrants in roles below their training (Budría & Martínez-de-Ibarreta, 2021). Professional language training raises employment probability among unemployed immigrants when instruction is connected to work tasks (Lang, 2022). Low-education immigrants with stronger English proficiency also adjust differently to local labor-demand shocks (Furtado & Kong, 2024). These studies distinguish language as human capital from language as a gatekeeping criterion applied by employers and credentialing systems.

Safety reveals the cost of inaccessible communication after hiring. Migrant workers in Thailand described language and procedural barriers when reporting accidents and filing compensation claims (Yotwilai, 2024). Indonesian workers in South Korea encounter cross-cultural communication problems that require preparation beyond vocabulary instruction (Fahzaria *et al.*, 2024). Domestic workers in Hong Kong face language barriers within employment relations marked by dependence and unequal bargaining power (Oktavianus, 2025). Japanese eldercare recruitment links workplace language learning to a licensing examination, making host institutions part of workers' professional mobility (Otomo, 2020).

Telephone triage with migrant women creates uncertainty when midwives lack a shared language or immediate interpreting support (Schytt *et al.*, 2025). Language access in safety systems includes understandable training, low-risk reporting channels, interpretation and remedies that remain usable after an incident.

Language Discrimination, Institutional Inclusion and Intervention

Language discrimination converts communication difference into unequal treatment. Migrant professionals experience exclusion in virtual as well as face-to-face work, although digital settings change the visibility of accent, fluency and participation (Back & Piekkari, 2024). In India, language and religion combine in intersectional workplace microaggressions (Bakshi, 2024). Indonesian migrants in Kuwait report translanguing discrimination even when multilingual ability is necessary for their work (Ali *et al.*, 2025). South African employment law recognizes language as a possible ground of unfair discrimination, but adjudication still requires attention to job relevance and institutional context (Louw, 2022). A global language mandate can also allocate unearned status to native speakers without an equivalent change in performance (Neeley & Dumas, 2016). Inclusion requires scrutiny of evaluation criteria, meeting practices, promotion pathways and complaints systems.

Institutional interventions vary in reach. Nurses caring for migrants identify interpreting, cultural mediation,

Table 2 : Workplace language-barrier pathways, outcomes and institutional controls

Barrier location	Mechanism	Organizational outcome	Institutional control	Source
Multinational teams	Unequal fluency changes trust & knowledge integration	Lower participation & incomplete knowledge processing	Facilitated meetings, multilingual documentation, & explicit turn allocation	Tenzer <i>et al.</i> (2014, 2021)
Corporate language policy	Fluency becomes a status signal	Status loss or unearned status gain	Role-relevant evaluation & monitoring of language-policy effects	Neeley (2013); Neeley & Dumas (2016)
Recruitment & brokerage	Multilingual employees bridge organizational units	Improved transfer with concentrated linguistic workload	Recognition, workload allocation, & multiple brokers	Peltokorpi & Vaara (2014)
Labor-market entry	Host-language requirements filter access to jobs	Employment gains or education–job mismatch	Occupation-linked training & credential support	Budría & Martínez-de-Ibarreta (2021); Lang (2022)
Safety & remedies	Inaccessible reporting & claims procedures	Underreporting, delayed care, & weak compensation access	Translated training, low-risk reporting, & interpreter availability	Yotwilai (2024); Schytt <i>et al.</i> (2025)
Workplace inclusion	Accent, language, migration, & religion shape judgments	Microaggressions & discriminatory treatment	Job-relevance tests, complaint access, & decision audits	Bakshi (2024); Ali <i>et al.</i> (2025)
Digital mediation	Translation platforms alter visibility & data control	Expanded access with accuracy, privacy, & surveillance risks	Quality assurance, confidentiality rules, & human review	Back & Piekkari (2024); Laurant <i>et al.</i> (2025)

training and organizational coordination as practical needs (Camedda & Righi, 2024). Macro-level policy and funding conditions influence whether trained interpreters become routine healthcare infrastructure (Puthoopparambil *et al.*, 2021). A meta-review of migrant healthcare access finds that translation is effective only when users can locate, trust and obtain the service at the needed time (Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025). Digital language management can scale translation and multilingual documentation, but governance is needed for accuracy, confidentiality and access (Lauring *et al.*, 2025). Employment training works best when linked to occupational tasks and employer demand rather than detached general proficiency (Lang, 2022). Institutional inclusion combines speaker development with redesigned communication systems and accountable decisions.

MATERTALS AND METHODS

The manuscript uses a structured narrative synthesis to integrate qualitative, quantitative, legal and conceptual evidence whose outcomes are not statistically commensurable. Crossref-indexed searches were conducted in August 2026 with combinations of “language barriers,” “multilingual students,” “academic performance,” “classroom participation,” “international students,” “online learning,” “workplace communication,” “migrant workers,” “employment,”

“language discrimination,” “multinational teams,” and “healthcare.” Eligibility required a peer-reviewed journal article, a resolvable DOI and a direct connection to performance, communication, access, or inclusion in an educational or workplace setting. We conducted the search as one integrated exercise; we did not create initial and update corpora. The final evidence base contains 55 substantive studies and three methodology studies. Synthesis followed three complementary methodological sources. Campbell *et al.* (2020) informed transparent grouping and reporting when meta-analysis was not appropriate. Lucas *et al.* (2007) supported the combination of textual narrative and thematic comparison across study designs. Rodgers *et al.* (2009) informed attention to study context, mechanism and cautious interpretation of moderators. Each substantive article was coded for setting, population, barrier location, mediating process, reported outcome, intervention and equity implication. One dominant theme was assigned for corpus counting, while cross-theme relationships were retained in interpretation. The six themes contain 9, 10, 9, 9, 10 and 8 studies, respectively. Fifty-one of the 55 substantive studies were published during 2020–2025; four foundational organizational studies from 2013–2016 were retained because they established trust, status and knowledge-transfer mechanisms used by recent research.

Table 3: Thematic coverage and analytical structure of the review corpus

Theme	n	Primary setting	Analytical focus
Academic performance & epistemic access	9	Schools & higher education	Instructional language, disciplinary genres, reasoning, assessment, academic literacy
Participation, belonging, & family engagement	10	Classrooms, campuses, school–family communication	Voice, identity, affect, parent access, social & epistemic inclusion
Digital, vocational, & clinical education	9	Online courses & professional programs	Platform access, specialized discourse, professional identity, high-stakes communication
Workplace communication & knowledge	9	Multinational teams & professional meetings	Trust, status, participation, knowledge processing, brokerage
Employment, professional mobility, & safety	10	Labor markets, migrant work, healthcare	Hiring, skill mismatch, training, licensing, accident reporting, triage
Language discrimination & institutional inclusion	8	Organizations, law, & services	Microaggressions, unequal status, interpreting, access, institutional accountability
Total substantive corpus	55		

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis identifies a common mechanism across education and work: language rules influence whether knowledge becomes observable. Nursing students’ assessed performance varies with English skills even when professional learning is the target (Nasirudeen & Xiao, 2020). Multinational teams lose knowledge when linguistic asymmetry restricts participation and integration (Tenzer *et al.*, 2021). Migrant workers can possess safety knowledge yet remain unable to activate

reporting and compensation procedures (Yotwilai, 2024). English-medium universities likewise connect belonging with access to academic discourse (Joubert & Sibanda, 2022). Language barriers are not equivalent to low competence; they emerge when a person’s repertoire and the institution’s required channel do not align.

A second pattern is redistribution. Common-language mandates can lower coordination costs while lowering nonnative speakers’ status (Neeley, 2013). Virtual work does not remove this inequality because language-based

discrimination continues through meetings, text and platform-mediated interaction (Back & Piekkari, 2024). Distance education can reproduce unequal access when learners lack interaction, technology, or linguistically responsive support (Gitschthaler *et al.*, 2022). Healthcare translation can also fail when policy, staffing and workflow prevent access at the point of need (Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025). Evaluation needs separate measures for aggregate efficiency, individual performance, participation, burden and distributive equity.

The strongest interventions match the location of the barrier. Selective translanguaging changes access to concepts and classroom authority (Sah & Li, 2024), while universal design changes the architecture of online participation (Emihovich, 2024). Language–region matching in refugee placement also demonstrates the value of structural alignment beyond individual training (Schmid, 2023). Digital language management changes organizational communication infrastructure but adds risks involving accuracy and surveillance (Lauring *et al.*, 2025). Occupational language training improves employment when linked to professional tasks (Lang, 2022) and trained interpreting requires institutional implementation rather than informal availability (Puthooppambil *et al.*, 2021). Language-sensitive recruitment can create cross-unit knowledge bridges, yet organizations must recognize and distribute the brokerage workload (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2014). Future studies can compare intervention costs, track outcomes over time, report differential effects across linguistic groups and test whether gains in performance coincide with gains in voice and decision authority.

CONCLUSION

Language barriers influence academic performance, workplace productivity, safety, professional mobility and inclusion because institutions organize knowledge and authority through particular communication norms. Effective responses begin by identifying where the barrier sits: in instructional language, assessment, digital design, interaction, recruitment, credentialing, reporting, or access to services. Individual language development remains valuable, but it cannot replace accessible communication systems or fair evaluation. Education and workplace policy gain coherence when multilingual resources are recognized, specialized language support is tied to real tasks, translation and interpreting are reliably available and outcomes are assessed for both performance and equity. This approach treats language inclusion as a property of institutional design and shared accountability.

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