

Language as Communication Barrier for Foreign Students: Evidence from Gujarat State Universities

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ABSTRACT

Language is vital for interaction in every academic environment. The ability of learners to communicate in a common language is relevant for teaching and learning to run smoothly. This study was to investigate the challenges foreign students in Gujarat encounter concerning language and its effect on their academic activities. The author employed the descriptive survey method of research. The population was all foreign students of higher education institutions in Gujarat, India. An online questionnaire was utilised for data collection. The author used descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) for data analysis. The analysis revealed that language differences affect communication among foreign students more than any other factor; foreign students' academic work, social life, and adjustability are all affected by communication barriers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is pivotal in how people relate to others in all situations. Without a common language, verbal communication is nearly impossible, meaning individuals cannot mingle with each other and cannot share their views. [Jungtare \(2015\)](#) stated that due to language barriers, there are numerous issues that the individual's incapacity to articulate thoughts clearly and with full command of the communication language creates.

Recently, there has been a rapid upsurge in the number of foreign students from diverse regions and cultures worldwide in India. Approximately 33,300 foreign students from over 160 countries arrived in India between 2016 and 2021, with 2019 seeing the highest number of foreigners. In 2019, nearly 75,000 students chose India to further their education, compared to 72,268 in 2018. Over 70,000 students were also enrolled in the previous two years ([Kaushik, 2021](#)). The rise in foreign students in India is due to the realisation in other countries of the quality of the Indian education system and the low cost of tuition compared to other countries.

India's educational system has gained relevance worldwide due to its ability to impact the world through its education, especially in information and communication technology (ICT) and medicine. [IBEF \(2022\)](#) outlined

that India is the world's third most appealing investment destination for technology transactions. According to the Global Innovation Index 2021 ([WIPO, 2021](#)), India ranks number one in central and southern Asia regarding innovation economies. The increase in international students aligns with NEP 2020's call for internationalising Higher Education in India ([MHRD, 2020](#)).

Foreign students entering India encounter challenges, including adapting to different dishes, weather conditions, and other cultures. The most notable of them is the barrier language poses. Challenges foreign students face in India include the language barrier, cultural adaptation, and difficulty writing and comprehending class lectures ([Edoofa, 2020](#)). Only 11.38% of the Indian population speaks English, which indicates that most Indian citizens do not speak English ([The Indian Blog, 2020](#)).

As a state in India, Gujarat has not been left out regarding the increase in foreign students. Gujarat has received more foreign students recently, notably from Bangladesh and Africa. The Indian Express reported an enrolment of 2,290 for the 2019/2020 academic year compared to 1,195 from the 2018/2019 academic year ([Sharma, 2020](#)). There are positives to the increase in the number of foreign students in the state, but it also comes with challenges

and difficulties for both the students and the host Universities. With Gujarat being a state with different cultures, diverse religions, and languages (Gujarat, Hindi, Marathi, Marwari, Sindi, and Urdu), foreign students encounter challenges adapting to life in the state.

Many countries, if not all, are willing to accept foreign students, regardless of these challenges. Nations go to the extent of awarding national scholarships to students of different nationalities to study in their countries. This shows that having foreigners in your education system comes with benefits. One of the apparent benefits the universities enjoy from admitting foreign students is the increase in university enrolment. Universities also benefit financially from accepting foreign students. Most universities charge higher fees for self-funded foreign students than their nationals, which is an avenue to increase the financial inflows of these universities. Perrott (2003) outlined that foreign students contributed \$1.7 billion, making education the fourth largest export gain in New Zealand. The U.S. Department of Commerce reported \$45 billion from international students in 2018, a significant contribution to the American economy (IIE, n.d.).

Montanelli and Stenstrom (1986) outlined some benefits of research publications: job advancement, recognition, improved relationships with faculty colleagues, and innovation awareness. Due to this, every institution seeks to recruit the best students who can perform to help uplift its image. Be it in sports, academics, or anything else, being able to cast your net vastly increases your chances of attracting the best of the best. Recruiting international students increases every institution's chance of recruiting excellent students.

2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The review of related literature for the study touched on the cultural barriers faced by foreign students in Gujarat, the academic barriers faced by foreign students in Gujarat, language barriers, and cultural difficulties.

2.1. *The Culture Faced by Foreign Students in Gujarat*

UNESCO reported over 5.3 million international students from various countries studying in multiple destinations in 2017, more than a 100% increase from the 2 million reported in 2000 (Liu-Farrer, 2022). According to the report, it was realised that over 50% of all international students were enrolled in educational programs in countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany, and the Russian Federation. This is also true for the number of foreign students in India, which has been increasing recently, and the state of Gujarat has not been left out. UNESCO's statistics indicated 49,348 international students in various Indian universities, forming 0.8% of the total number of students in the country as of 2022 (UNESCO, n.d. -b). Sharma (2020) reported an increase in the number of foreign students in Gujarat from 1,195 in the 2018/2019 academic year to 2,290 in the 2019/2020 academic year. Institutions like the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda have a dedicated office called the Office of International Affairs (OIA) to receive these students and make life

in their new environment more effortless. The OIA assists students throughout their stay in India, from registration, fee payment, accommodation, and so on, to ensure foreign students integrate easily into their new environment.

That notwithstanding, students still have to deal with some difficulties when it comes to adjusting to the language and culture of the people of Gujarat. Some aspects of the culture of the people of Gujarat, such as the type of food, are significant barriers that students have to deal with. Some schools do not allow students to live outside the university hostel facilities or allow foreign students to cook. They are only allowed to eat from the hostel canteens. This makes it difficult for the students to adjust to food as it might differ from what they are used to, especially for students from outside Asia, such as Africa, Europe, and America. Sicut, in his study, outlined that the prevalent challenge of foreign students studying in the Philippines is their ability to get used to Filipino food and hygiene practices (Sicut, 2011).

2.2. *Academic Barrier Faced by Foreign Students in Gujarat*

2.2.1. *Language Barriers*

Language is fundamental in academia because communication in whatever form, whether written or spoken, is the main drive for transmitting knowledge from one point to the other. Huff and Christensen (2018) define communication and language respectively as “a social event that requires sending and receiving messages with a shared understanding of meaning” and “a structured and shared form of communication like spoken and written words, figures, characters, and gestures, or a combination of these” (p. 2). Assuming that instructional communication is deficient, learning can be unfavourably impacted. On the off chance that communication is efficient, learning can be favourably influenced. The significance of instructional communication cannot be over-accentuated in accomplishing educational goals (Mustapha & Argungu, 2019). Foreign students encounter various challenges with language in their academic work in India, although instructional delivery is supposed to be in the English language. The English tone is different in different countries, which is a challenge as students find it difficult to understand their lecturers and colleagues for effective communication during lessons.

Another challenge students mentioned is the mixture of the local languages, such as Hindi and Gujarati, during lessons. To keep all students in the loop concerning academic activities, lecturers concerned try to use other languages alongside English during classes. Some students have mentioned that this makes understanding difficult as it makes it difficult to concentrate on what is being taught. Although Antón *et al.* (2015) concluded they have not been able to ascertain any harmful effect on student retention when more than one language is used (multi-lingual classroom), students still complain about this. However, it is vital to keep in mind that in the long haul, when the students come into contact with local speakers of the primary language, language mixing might hinder general understandability (Ansar, 2017).

2.2.2. Cultural Difficulties

Culture is a way of life for a group of people. Culture includes the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the language you speak, and the God you worship. In the most basic terms, culture embodies how we think and act (NIOS, n.d., p. 1).

Cultural differences add to the difficulties faced by foreign students in India. Adaptation difficulties concern how much a student's native culture differs from the Indian culture. In addition to language issues, international students' interactions with other cultures may impact their academic motivation and learning feedback. For example, students in certain nations might be trained that staring right at college professors while talking to them is a sign of disrespect. Acknowledging other people's expectations varies by culture. Students may have been taught to express themselves straightforwardly in discussions. They may also have been taught not to speak in class unless asked. Students may be using a particular learning style different from their new environment. For instance, a student from an environment where he is encouraged to understand concepts and produce them as he understands them during an examination will find it difficult to cope with a system where the memorisation of facts is the order of the day.

International students become distressed as a result of unfamiliarity with their surroundings. In response to the racism and hostility they are exposed to, they frequently express disaffection and confusion (Newsome & Cooper, 2016). The authors stated that Cultural distance, cultural shock, language problems, differences in communication styles, and cross-cultural relationships all contributed to the students' high levels of sociocultural stress. The author further stated that weather was a common first-time difficulty for foreign students. The works of these writers have emphasised that foreign students, regardless of their language problems, also have to deal with other challenges.

Another significant aspect of Indian education that foreign students must adapt to is their mode of attendance for classes. In many countries, especially in Africa, tertiary education is in the lecture format. Students attend lectures when they have to and return to their homes afterward. However, in India, students must adapt to sitting in the classroom for at least 6 hours, from the bachelor's to the master's level.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study's objectives were to ascertain the following:

1. Whether language is a barrier to instructional delivery for foreign students,
2. The challenges foreign students encounter concerning communication in their studies.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

The study employed a descriptive survey design. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques

were used. Onley and Barnes (2013) stated that surveys employ a collection of questions to provide a broad overview of a group's opinions, attitudes, self-reported behaviours, demographic characteristics, and background data. As a result, surveys are designed to gather information about the current state of a phenomenon.

The study employed the cross-sectional method of data collection by survey, that is, data collection at a particular point in time. Cherry (2019) explained that a cross-sectional study simultaneously examines data from a group of people. In this study, participants are chosen based on certain variables of interest.

4.2. Population

The population for the study is all foreign students in Gujarat, India.

4.3. Sample and Sampling Techniques

The study sample was 89 foreign students in the state of Gujarat. Random sampling was used for the selection of the sample. Link to Google forms containing questionnaire for the study was sent to various WhatsApp groups of the populations of different institutions in Gujarat. Respondents interested in the study participated by answering the questionnaire through the link.

4.4. Research Instrument

The researcher utilised a questionnaire for data collection.

4.5. Questionnaire

The questionnaire of the study was in three sections. The first section collected demographic information relevant to the study from the respondents. The second section was about factors affecting communication among foreign students. In writing, the respondents were asked to state some factors affecting effective communication among foreign students. The questionnaire's third section asked about the effect of communication barriers on foreign students. The respondents were asked to identify how statements in the questionnaire affected them as foreign students based on academic activities, social lives, and adjustability. They were to indicate the effect level by selecting the appropriate response by the keys: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.

4.6. Validity

For the tool's validity, experts in the field of teacher education were given the questionnaire together with a proposal showing the research problem and objectives. The experts checked the clarity of the contents of the questionnaire and its grammar. The experts' suggestions were incorporated in modifying the questionnaire to ensure it measures the intended objective. The questions were then administered to students with similar characteristics to the intended population (foreign students) and analysed. The questionnaire was modified again to ensure that the anomalies realised were corrected.

4.7. Data Collection Procedure

The researcher created the questionnaire using Google Forms. The data was collected by sending the population a

link to the Google forms through their WhatsApp contacts and groups. The researcher sought permission and took the population's contacts from the international affairs offices of the various universities with international students in Gujarat.

4.8. Data Analysis

The data collected was analysed in three faces. Descriptive statistics were utilised with the use of Microsoft Excel for the analysis. First, the demographic characteristics (Gender and Language Spoken) collected from the participants were analysed into percentages.

The data collected for the qualitative part of the study, where the participants were asked to state factors that affect communication among foreign students, were analysed thematically under the following themes; language differences, cultural differences, social factors, and others. The frequencies realised under the themes were then converted into percentages for analysis.

Lastly, the researcher assigned values to the five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree-5, Agree-4, Neutral-3, Disagree-2, Strongly Disagree-1) questionnaire. Descriptive statistics (Percentages and Means) were then calculated for each question's responses. From the assigned values, the mean rank ranges were found to be Strongly Agree (4.3-5), Agree (3.5-4.2), Neutral (2.6-3.4), Disagree (1.9-2.6), and Strongly Disagree (1-1.8). The data collected helped the author to conclude whether the foreign students considered any of the questions from the questionnaire a condition affecting their stay in Gujarat, India.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Demographic Characteristics

Out of 89 respondents, 46 (51.7%) were male, and 43 (48.3%) were female. This indicates that the admission of foreign students to higher education institutions in Gujarat based on gender is almost evenly matched. This is a positive sign as it conforms to the gender equality in education being preached worldwide by various organisations. UNESCO (n.d. -a) stipulates that, in order to accomplish gender equality, policies must be put in place to ensure that women and men, girls and boys, have equivalent access to and empowerment from education.

The participants were then asked to indicate whether they spoke English or not. The responses of the participants showed that most participants can speak English. 86 (96.6%) participants indicated that they could speak English. This shows that communication should not be an issue for most participants (foreign students) if English is used.

5.2. Factors Affecting Effective Communication among Foreign Students

The participants for the second part of the questionnaire were made to state some factors from their perspective that affect communication among foreign students. The factors written by the participants were grouped under the themes: language differences, cultural differences, social factors, and others. Table I shows the frequencies and percentages of the various themes used for the analysis.

TABLE I: FACTORS AFFECTING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AMONG FOREIGN STUDENTS

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Language differences	80	67.8
Cultural differences	14	11.9
Social factors	5	4.2
Others	19	16.1
Total	118	100

Table I shows that 80 (67.8%) participants gave factors falling under the theme of language differences. 14 (11.9%) fell under cultural differences, while 5 (4.2%) fell under the theme of social factors. The factors that fell under the theme "others" include straightforwardness and lack of professionally trained communication tutors, which was 16.1% of the reasons cited. It can be deduced from the above analysis that the prevalent factor that affects communication among foreign students is language differences. It can also be realised that cultural differences contribute to the communication challenges of foreign students of Gujarat.

5.3. Effect of Communication Barriers of Foreign Students with Regards to Academic Activities, Social Lives, and Adjustability

To determine the effect of the communication barrier on foreign students concerning academic activities, social lives, and adjustability, the participants were asked to respond to a five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The responses are shown in Table II.

From Table II, concerning academic activities, the participants indicated that what affects them most is the mixture of other languages with the English language, which distracts their attention during lectures. The statement ranked first with a mean of 4.3, which means the participants strongly agree with that statement. The participants also agree with the statement 'lecturers do not care for the language needs of foreign students during lectures,' with the question ranked second with a mean of 3.6. The participants also agree with the assertion that they hesitate to participate effectively in interactions during teaching-learning processes and co-curricular activities, with a mean of 3.5. The lowest of the means was 2.6 for the statement 'the schools' website is mostly in other languages and makes information flow to foreign students difficult,' indicating that the participants were neutral regarding their responses.

Concerning the effect of communication barriers on the social life of foreign students, the participants indicated, from their responses, that they agree that they cannot access public places such as banks and shopping centres due to language differences, with a mean of 3.8. The participants also agree that 'public notices are always in other languages (Hindi or Gujarat), making it difficult to know what is happening in my community with a mean of 4.2. The participants also agree with the statements, 'I cannot effectively communicate with other students/people in my community/hostel' and 'I have a complicated relationship with my colleagues due to language differences, with both accumulating means of 3.7 each. Also, the participant

TABLE II: EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION BARRIERS OF FOREIGN STUDENTS REGARDING ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES, SOCIAL LIVES, AND ADJUSTABILITY

Categories	Questions	Frequencies (Percentages)					Mean
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
Academic activities	1. Lecturers do not care for the language needs of foreign students during lectures	23 (26%)	27 (30%)	21 (24%)	14 (16%)	4 (4%)	3.6
	2. I hesitate to participate effectively in interactions that take place during teaching-learning processes and co-curricular activities	14 (16%)	37 (42%)	19 (21%)	16 (18%)	3 (3%)	3.5
	3. The schools' website is mostly in other languages and makes information flow to foreign students difficult	12 (13%)	9 (10%)	19 (21%)	33 (37%)	16 (18%)	2.6
	4. Most notices on campus are in other languages and do not have English translations attached to them	21 (24%)	18 (20%)	16 (18%)	27 (30%)	7 (8%)	3.2
	5. The mixture of other languages with the English language distracts my attention during lectures	44 (49%)	33 (37%)	7 (8%)	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	4.3
Social life	6. I find it difficult to access public places such as banks and shopping centres due to language differences	31 (35%)	27 (30%)	16 (18%)	15 (17%)	0 (0%)	3.8
	7. I am not able to effectively communicate with other students/people in my community/hostel	27 (30%)	27 (30%)	22 (25%)	11 (12%)	2 (2%)	3.7
	8. Public notices are always in other languages (Hindi or Gujarat), making it difficult to know what is going on in my community	42 (47%)	28 (31%)	14 (16%)	5 (6%)	0 (0%)	4.2
	9. I have a complicated relationship with my colleagues due to language differences	25 (28%)	25 (28%)	26 (29%)	9 (10%)	4 (4%)	3.7
	10. India is a multi-lingual country where foreigners can communicate with others easily	5 (6%)	16 (18%)	17 (19%)	32 (36%)	19 (21%)	2.5
Adjustability	11. It is difficult to access transportation (e.g., public buses, trains) due to language differences	24 (27%)	36 (40%)	21 (24%)	5 (6%)	3 (3%)	3.8
	12. It is difficult to get accommodation to rent due to language differences	27 (30%)	30 (34%)	23 (26%)	8 (9%)	1 (1%)	3.8
	13. It is difficult to buy food from the street because of language differences	25 (28%)	30 (34%)	23 (26%)	9 (10%)	2 (2%)	3.8
	14. I feel isolated when amid my colleagues due to the language differences	30 (34%)	38 (43%)	12 (13%)	7 (8%)	2 (2%)	4.0
	15. I cannot attend public events such as weddings and church services due to language differences	28 (31%)	30 (34%)	21 (24%)	8 (9%)	2 (2%)	3.8
TOTAL		378	411	277	203	66	

disagrees that India is a multi-lingual country where foreigners can easily communicate with others, with a mean of 2.5.

For the adjustability of foreign students, the participants agree with the statements '*It is difficult to access transportation (e.g., public buses, trains) due to language differences,*' '*It is difficult to get accommodation to rent due to language differences,*' '*It is difficult to buy food from the street because of language differences,*' and '*I cannot attend public events such as weddings and church service due to language differences*' with all these statements accumulating means of 3.8 while '*I feel isolated when amid my colleagues due to the language differences*' had a mean of 4.0 indicating that the participants agree with that statement.

6. DISCUSSION

The demographic information revealed that 46 respondents are males and 43 are females. This indicates that the admission process of foreign students in Gujarat follows gender equality in higher education admissions. Aktas *et al.* (2019) stated, "*Women's representation in education, especially in higher education, is an integral part of broader gender equity discussions*" (p. 167). Male and female respondents representing 51.7% and 48.3%, respectively, signify a near parity concerning admissions gender-wise.

Also, the respondents indicated whether they speak English or not. It was revealed that 86 (96.6%) out of 89 speak English. That suggests that most of the respondents (foreign students) speak English and should be able to communicate effectively in English.

For factors affecting effective communication among foreign students, from the themes of the various responses given by the respondents, most respondents indicated that 'language differences' are the major hindrance when it comes to the factors preventing effective communication. With 67.8% of the responses under "language differences," there is enough evidence to show the importance of a commonly spoken language in communication. 14 (11.9%) of the responses also fell under the category "cultural difference," which designates that when it comes to communication difficulties among foreign students of Gujarat, the difference in culture among students is also a concern that needs to be considered. Klimova and Semradova (2012) posited that the fundamental barriers to communication include cultural differences, a different view of the world, educational or professional differences, and language differences.

Concerning the effect of the communication barrier on foreign students, the respondents' responses showed that when it comes to academics, the mixture of languages by professors during lectures leads—the statement accumulated a mean rating of 4.3. Lecturers do not care for the language needs of foreign students, and foreign students' hesitation to participate effectively in interactions in class and co-curricular activities follow with mean rates of 3.6 and 3.5, respectively. The above analyses stipulate that language difference is a significant hurdle foreign students of Gujarat have to deal with concerning their academic work. According to Bakar *et al.* (2020), communication difficulties among students impacted their achievements.

Regarding the effect on social life, public notices are always in other languages (Hindi or Gujarat), making it difficult to know what is happening in my community, with the highest mean rating of 4.2. I find it difficult to access public places such as banks and shopping centres due to language differences, followed by a rating of 3.8. I cannot effectively communicate with other students/people in my community/hostel, and I have a complicated relationship with my colleagues due to language differences; receiving a rating of 3.7 shows how highly the respondents rate these assertions regarding their social life. The respondents have indicated that language difficulties affect their social life as foreign students. Baklashova and Kazakov (2016) indicated that many transitional challenges are frequently encountered by foreign students as soon as they arrive to enrol in Russian universities.

I feel isolated among my colleagues due to the language differences, receiving a mean rating of 4.0, while the rest of the statements received ratings of 3.8 each. This shows how highly the respondents rate all these statements regarding their adjustability to life as foreign students in a new environment. According to Andrade (2006), the English language and culture are the leading causes of adjustment difficulties for international students.

7. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The study's findings show that the gender distribution of foreign students in Gujarat is almost evenly matched, which is suitable for gender equality in higher education admissions.

It was also drawn from the study that most respondents can speak English, which is supposed to be the medium of instruction in universities in India. The responses indicate that 96.6% of the respondents can speak English.

Also, the findings revealed that language differences affect communication among foreign students more than any other factor. Although other factors, such as cultural differences, were also mentioned, language differences were predominant among these factors, showing language's importance in communication.

It has also been revealed that foreign students' academic work, social life, and adjustability are all affected by communication barriers. The respondents have indicated that using multiple languages during lectures affects their academics most, making concentration and understanding of concepts difficult. It was also revealed that language differences affect both the social life and the ability of foreign students to adjust to their new environment.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to explore the barriers language differences pose to foreign students in Gujarat, India. From the study's findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Female and male candidates are almost given the same opportunity when it comes to the admission of foreign students into higher education institutions in Gujarat, India.
2. Most foreign students in Gujarat can speak English, indicating that the students should be able to communicate and participate in class effectively.
3. Language differences among foreign students and their new environment affect communication most. It should be noted that other factors, such as cultural and social factors, also impact communication, according to the study's findings, but not as much as language differences.
4. Communication barriers affect foreign students' ability to adjust quickly to their new environment. Foreign students' academic activities and social life are also affected by communication barriers since it is difficult for them to undertake certain activities because they cannot easily communicate with the natives of their new environment.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the summary of key findings of this study, it is recommended that:

1. The initial language proficiency program in the new environment is organised for foreign students to enable them to grasp the foundation of the local language.
2. University teachers should be advised to use English during lectures.
3. Communities should be sensitised to attach English translations to notices placed in public places knowing that foreigners are among them.

4. All campus notices should have English translations if they are not originally English so foreigners can easily read them and know what is happening. Also, school websites should have English translations if they are not in English.
5. The universities should have special offices to deal with all issues concerning foreign students.
6. The universities should have personnel who will act as intermediaries for foreign students when undertaking activities involving the natives, such as renting apartments and opening bank accounts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning this study.

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