Language as a Tool for Social Inclusion: Experiences of Multilingual Learners in Migrant Contexts in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This study explores how language shapes the social and academic experiences of multilingual learners from migrant families in Uzbekistan. Drawing on classroom observations and teacher reflections, it examines how limited language proficiency can affect students' participation, sense of belonging, and academic progress. The findings show that migrant students often struggle to fully engage in class and build peer relationships, which can slow their learning compared to native students. However, supportive teacher practices—such as flexible grouping and emotionally responsive teaching—can help reduce anxiety and foster inclusion. The study highlights the importance of language-sensitive and inclusive pedagogy in increasingly diverse educational settings.

Keywords Multilingual learners, Migrant students, Social inclusion, Language barriers, Classroom participation, Teacher strategies, Uzbekistan / Central Asia, Emotional well-being

1. Introduction

Migration has become increasingly common in Uzbekistan, leading to more linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. Many families move for work or education, and their children must adapt to new school environments where the language of instruction may differ from what they speak at home. While migration can open new opportunities, it can also create challenges, particularly in terms of communication, belonging, and academic success.

Language plays a central role in shaping students' classroom experiences. For migrant learners, limited proficiency in the dominant language can make it difficult to participate in lessons, connect with peers, and feel part of the classroom community. As a result, some students experience slower academic progress and emotional stress.

Despite these realities, there is limited research on how language affects migrant students in Central Asia. This study aims to explore how language influences social inclusion among multilingual learners in Uzbekistan and how teachers can support

their integration.

Research Questions:

1. How does language affect the social inclusion of migrant students in multilingual classrooms?

2. What challenges do these students face in participating and forming peer relationships?

3. What teaching practices support their social and academic integration?

2. Literature Review

Previous research has shown that language is closely connected to both academic achievement and social belonging for migrant students. Cummins (2000) argues that language proficiency is essential for accessing curriculum content, while Norton (2013) highlights the role of language in shaping identity and participation.

Studies also suggest that students who struggle with the language of instruction are more likely to feel isolated and disengaged (Piller, 2016). At the same time, teacher practices can make a meaningful difference. Culturally responsive and emotionally supportive teaching has been shown to create more inclusive learning environments (Gay, 2010).

However, much of this research focuses on Western or refugee contexts. There is a lack of studies examining everyday classroom experiences of migrant students in Central Asia, which this study seeks to address.

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to better understand students' lived classroom experiences.

3.1 Context and Participants

The research was conducted in a private educational center in Uzbekistan, where the researcher works as an English language teacher. Participants were migrant students who had moved to Uzbekistan with their families for work or other personal reasons. These students spoke a variety of home languages, including Turkish and Russian.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through:

 -Classroom observations, focusing on student participation and peer interaction.

- Reflective teaching journals documenting classroom challenges and strategies.

- Informal conversations with students to understand their emotional and social experiences.

One key case involved a Turkish student who transferred to a new group after

experiencing bullying and social anxiety in his previous class.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to language, inclusion, emotional well-being, and teaching strategies.

 3.4 Ethical Considerations

All student identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and participation was voluntary.

4. Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data.

4.1 Language as a Barrier to Participation

Many migrant students found it difficult to participate fully in class discussions due to limited proficiency in the language of instruction. This affected their confidence and reduced their willingness to speak, which in turn slowed their academic progress.

4.2 Emotional Challenges and Social Exclusion

Some students experienced anxiety and feelings of isolation. One Turkish student, in particular, reported being bullied by peers in his previous group, which increased his social anxiety and made it harder for him to build relationships even after changing classes.

4.3 The Role of the Teacher in Fostering Inclusion

Teacher support played a crucial role in helping students feel more comfortable. Strategies such as pairing students with peers they trusted, gradually increasing group sizes, and creating a supportive classroom environment helped reduce anxiety and encouraged participation.

5. Discussion

The findings support existing research showing that language is deeply connected to both academic success and social inclusion. However, this study adds a Central Asian perspective, focusing on non-refugee migrant students in Uzbekistan.

The case of the Turkish student highlights how language barriers often interact with emotional factors, such as social anxiety, making inclusion more complex. At the same time, the study shows that thoughtful and responsive teaching practices can significantly improve students' classroom experiences.

These findings suggest that teachers play a key role in transforming classrooms into inclusive spaces where multilingual learners feel safe, valued, and capable of success.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how language shapes the social and academic experiences of migrant students in Uzbekistan. The findings show that language barriers can hinder

participation, belonging, and academic progress. However, supportive teacher practices—such as flexible grouping, emotional sensitivity, and gradual inclusion strategies—can help students overcome these challenges.

The study highlights the importance of training teachers to work effectively in multilingual classrooms and developing school policies that support migrant learners' emotional and linguistic needs. Future research could include student interviews and larger samples across different regions.

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