

**Overcoming Barriers:
A Study of Intercultural Communication Obstacles Among Southeast Asian Students at
Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages**

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Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, 2025

Abstract

This study examines the intercultural communication barriers encountered by Southeast Asian students at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Taiwan, focusing on their experiences with language challenges, social integration, and cultural adaptation. These students face both personal and academic difficulties stemming from stereotypes, prejudices, and language barriers in their daily lives. Through interviews, this research explores how Southeast Asian students navigate cultural differences and seek a sense of belonging within a predominantly Han Chinese society. Additionally, the study investigates the role of language proficiency and interaction patterns with Taiwanese peers in shaping their social adaptation. The findings reveal that Southeast Asian students face common challenges related to communication and social integration. Given the growing number of Southeast Asian students in Taiwan due to the New Southbound Policy, this study provides valuable insights into intercultural communication and suggests guidelines for enhancing support services, language learning, and inclusivity in Taiwan's higher education system.

Keywords: language barriers, intercultural communication, social integration, social adaptation

克服障礙：東南亞學生在文藻外語大學跨文化溝通障礙之研究

Brianne Odelin Winfried, B.A.

文藻外語大學, 2025

摘要

本研究探討在臺灣文藻外語大學就讀的東南亞學生所面臨的跨文化溝通障礙，聚焦於他們在語言挑戰、社會融入及文化適應方面的經歷。這些學生在日常生活中因刻板印象、偏見和語言障礙而面臨個人和學術上的困難。透過訪談，本研究探討了東南亞學生如何應對文化差異，並在以華人為主的社會中尋求歸屬感。此外，本研究還考察了語言能力和與臺灣同學的互動模式在其社會適應過程中所扮演的角色。研究結果顯示，東南亞學生在溝通及社會融入方面面臨著共同的挑戰。鑒於臺灣「新南向政策」下東南亞學生人數的持續增長，本研究為跨文化溝通提供了寶貴的見解，並提出了加強支援服務、語言學習及臺灣高等教育體系包容性的建議。

關鍵詞：語言障礙，跨文化溝通，社會融入，社會適應

PREFACE

This thesis is the result of a challenging yet rewarding journey that has tested my resilience, determination, and passion for learning. Throughout this experience, I have gained valuable insights and skills that I will carry forward in both my academic and personal life. I hope that this work will contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural communication and its impact on diverse student populations.

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to my family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this journey.

I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation to my advisor for their invaluable guidance and support.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of ChatGPT for providing language and grammar suggestions, which helped refine the clarity and readability of this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

This research explores the intercultural communication challenges faced by Southeast Asian students at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. These students encounter, language barriers, stereotypes, and how they develop various strategies to adapt and integrate socially. The study aims to understand how these students navigate these challenges, contributing to the broader field of intercultural communication. This research seeks to explore how Southeast Asian students are treated and how they cope with different barriers in Taiwan that enrich the field of intercultural communication study.

In 2016, Taiwan's Executive Yuan announced a promotion plan for the New Southbound Policy (NSP) to diversify Taiwan's risks and reduce reliance on a single market by strengthening Taiwan's relations with its southern neighbors, ranging from South and Southeast Asia to Australia and New Zealand. The strategy includes concrete initiatives for four key areas: economic and trade partnership, talent exchange, resource sharing, and regional connectivity. Taiwan aspires to share resources, talent, and markets with other nations by promoting economic, technical, and cultural exchanges, while also establishing a new and mutually advantageous model of collaboration. These measures aim to enhance Taiwan's regional integration by using its cultural, educational, technical, agricultural, and economic foundations.

Taiwan's higher education system has been the target of many students over the years and is continuing to grow. As Taiwan's Ministry of Education (MOE) said "Studying in

Taiwan has become a trend for those from the New Southbound nations”.¹ The number of foreign students had burst from 51,741 in 2016 to 65,383 in 2021.² Taiwan’s Ministry of Education (MOE) record shows that in 2018 alone there were approximately 126,997 foreign students studying in Taiwan with a third of the amount coming from partner nations targeted under the New Southbound Policy.³ The number of students from the New Southbound Nations increased significantly in the 2016 academic year and continued to expand, rising from 32,000 to over 60,000 in total in the 2019 academic year, with an 84.78 percent growth rate.⁴ The reason behind this is to develop the New Southbound Talent Development Program in 2017 where the MOE attempted to recruit Southeast Asian students with high potential by holding Taiwan higher education fairs or admission information sessions in Malaysia, Vietnam, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, and doubling scholarship quotas in these countries.⁵

Intercultural communication is a crucial field of research that investigates how people from various cultural origins connect and understand one another. Successful integration of overseas students is critical to their academic achievement and general well-being. Language skills and the capacity to handle cultural differences are critical parts of this process. Understanding these interactions can contribute to more inclusive and supportive educational environments. Language limitations can have a substantial influence on overseas students' ability to assimilate into the local community, influencing both academic achievement and

¹ The Ministry of Labor The Ministry of Education, the National Development Council, "International Students Come Together to Taiwan, Where the One-Hundred Thirty Thousand Overseas Student Mark Has Been Passed," Ministry of Education Republic of China (Taiwan), 2021, <https://english.moe.gov.tw/cp-117-25416-d8868-1.html>.

² Yang Yuan-ting, and Jason Pan, "Poll Spotlights Foreign Students' Issues," 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2022/11/06/2003788377>.

³ Duncan DeAeth, "Foreign Students in Taiwan 10% of Total University and College Students in 2018," *Taiwan News* (Taiwan)2019, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3631340>.

⁴ Republic of China (Taiwan) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "2021 - 2022 Taiwan at a Glance," 2021 - 2022 *TAIWAN at a Glance*, 2021, [https://multilingual.mofa.gov.tw/web/web_UTF-8/MOFA/glance2021-2022/2021-2022%20Taiwan%20at%20a%20Glance%20\(English\).pdf](https://multilingual.mofa.gov.tw/web/web_UTF-8/MOFA/glance2021-2022/2021-2022%20Taiwan%20at%20a%20Glance%20(English).pdf).

⁵ The Ministry of Education

social relationships. These challenges can lead to feelings of isolation, stereotyping, and prejudice, compromising students' sense of belonging and mental health. Addressing these issues is critical to creating a friendly and inclusive atmosphere for overseas students. Having appropriate coping mechanisms is critical for students to overcome linguistic and cultural obstacles. This involves attempts to learn the local language, seek support networks, and participate in intercultural activities. Understanding how students develop and use these strategies can help improve support systems and integration policies for international students.

Research Motivation

This study seeks to support Southeast Asian students, who often receive less attention in Taiwan's higher education system compared to students from Western countries or migrant workers. By focusing on their unique experiences, this research contributes valuable insights to intercultural communication literature and informs language instruction and cross-cultural adaptation practices.

Research Purpose

The primary objective of this research is to explore the intercultural communication issues that Southeast Asian students encounter at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Taiwan. This paper seeks to investigate the challenges these students face, including as stereotypes, prejudices, and language barriers, as well as to examine the coping methods they use to resolve these challenges and integrate socially into Taiwanese culture. While the focus

on Southeast Asian students may seem overshadowed by discussions of Southeast Asian migrant workers or foreign students from Western countries, it's crucial to acknowledge the significant number of Southeast Asian students pursuing higher education in Taiwan. The research also evaluates the extent of social integration and interaction between Southeast Asian and local Taiwanese students, with an emphasis on how these interactions affect their sense of belonging and overall experience in Taiwan. By generating empirical data and theoretical insights, the research contributes to the academic fields of intercultural communication, language instruction, and cross-cultural adaptability, while also providing valuable recommendations for policymakers and educational institutions to enhance support systems, language education, and inclusivity for international students.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the correlation and influence of language challenges on intercultural communication and integration of Southeast Asian students in Taiwan, rather than to focus on regulatory and institutional support for language improvement. The findings have the potential to inform policymakers about the experiences and challenges that the students confront, offering useful insights into areas of the education system that require improvements. By addressing these intercultural communication issues, the study can contribute to the development of effective ways to improve language teaching, support services, and general inclusion for international students in Taiwan.

Research Questions

1. How do Southeast Asian students perceive and experience barriers during their study in Taiwan, and why do these barriers arise?

2. Why do language barriers impact the social integration of Southeast Asian students at Wenzao University, and how do they employ coping strategies to navigate these challenges?
3. How does the level of interaction between Southeast Asian students and local Taiwanese students contribute to or diminish their sense of belonging in Taiwan?

Contribution

The findings of this study have the potential to inform policymakers about the experiences and obstacles that Southeast Asian students experience while studying in Taiwan. By covering the intercultural communication challenges that these students face, policymakers might get valuable insights into the areas of the education system that need to be addressed. Furthermore, the findings of this study may be used to create effective measures that could improve the lives of Southeast Asian students and contribute to their successful integration into Taiwanese society. These efforts might include activities to improve language education, improve support services, and create a more open and inviting atmosphere for foreign students.

Limits

The sample is limited only to several Southeast Asian students studying in Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Taiwan, the data produced which might not entirely reflect on the situation of the broader population of Southeast Asian students in Taiwan. Secondly, the study focuses on students at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in

Kaohsiung, which might partially represent the experiences of Southeast Asian students in other regions of Taiwan. Different areas may bring varying degrees of integration issues and support systems. Thirdly, the study looks at students' experiences during a short time period, therefore it might not completely prove long-term trends or changes in intercultural communication issues and integration techniques.

Delimits

This study will only focus on the experiences of Southeast Asian students (Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, etc), this focus allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of this particular group. The study narrows its focus to look at intercultural communication challenges and their solutions, which makes it possible to analyze in detail how prejudices, stereotypes, and language barriers affect students' coping methods and social integration. Lastly, the study will be using qualitative research methods, interviews in particular which makes it possible to gain a deeper knowledge of students' individual experiences, emotions, and perceptions which may be missed in quantitative studies.

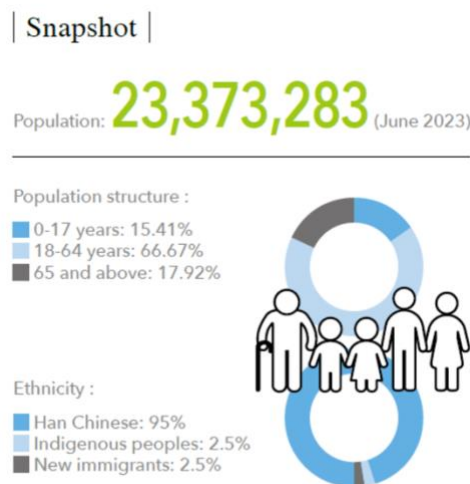
LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores the intercultural communication challenges that Southeast Asian students face in Taiwan, starting with an introduction to Taiwanese society and student's motivation to study in Taiwan then narrowing to the particular focus on language barriers, cultural stereotypes, and social integration. It investigates how these obstacles affect students' overall academic and social experiences. This paper seeks to give a theoretical framework for understanding the social integration processes required to promote inclusion in Taiwan's educational environment.

Taiwan's Demographics and Labor Needs

As of June 2023, Taiwan's population is at 23,737,283 primarily composed of Han Chinese (including Holo, who constitute roughly 70% of Taiwan's population, Hakka, and other groups originating in mainland China) (95%), indigenous people (2.5%), and new immigrants mostly from China and Southeast Asia (2.5%).⁶ This high level of homogeneity explains why many Taiwanese may not be as familiar with foreigners.

Figure 1 Taiwan's Demographic



⁶ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

(Source: Government Portal of the Republic of China)

Furthermore, over the past decade, Taiwan has faced challenges due to an aging population and low birth rate, leading to a significant decline in its working-age population and labor force.⁷ Taiwan, like other high income countries such as Japan, Italy, Finland, Portugal, Greece, and Germany, will become a 'super-aged' society in 2025.⁸ In fact, 25% of Taiwan's administrative regions have already reached this status ahead of the 2025 prediction.⁹ Currently, over 20% of the population is aged 65 or older, and this figure is projected to rise rapidly, with the elderly population expected to exceed 41.4% by 2060.¹⁰ What's more, in 2022, Taiwan's fertility rate (TFR), defined as the average number of children a woman is expected to have in her lifetime, declined to 0.87.¹¹ This is far below the replacement rate of 2.1 needed to maintain a stable population¹², despite the government spending more than \$3 billion on incentives to encourage its residents to have more children.¹³ The government has given more incentives including, giving six months of paid parental leave, compensated 60%, now 80% since July 1, 2021 of a new parent's wage.¹⁴ The government has also provided monetary incentive and a tax cut to parents with young

⁷ Grace C. Huang, "Can Lai Solve the Low Birthrate?," Taipei Times, 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2024/01/27/2003812676>.

⁸ James C T Hsueh, "Taiwan Heading into Its Super-Aged Era," East Asia Forum, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/03/04/taiwan-heading-into-its-super-aged-era/>.

⁹ Keoni Everington, "Taiwan on Pace to Become 'Super-Aged Society' This Year," *Taiwan News* (Taiwan)2024, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/5107187>.

¹⁰ Yumei Lin, "Southeast Asian Migrant Workers in Taiwan: Human Rights and Soft Power," *Center For Strategic & International Studies | CSIS*2023, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/southeast-asian-migrant-workers-taiwan-human-rights-and-soft-power>.

¹¹ Stephanie Yang, and David Shen, "Looking for a Date? In Taiwan, the Government Is Here to Help," Los Angeles Times, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-10-24/taiwan-government-matchmaker-plummeting-birth-rate>.

¹² Huang

¹³ Yang, and Shen

¹⁴ Taiwan's Immigrants Global News Network, "Infant Care Allowance: 80% of Salary and 2 Days Added to Maternity Leave Effective July 1, 2021," 2021, <https://news.immigration.gov.tw/NewsSection/Detail/9132e6a4-db68-4937-995b-90209f8d2fc2?category=8&lang=EN>.

children, as well as a measure in investing in child care centers.¹⁵ However, these methods still proved to be ineffective. Several factors have contributed to this failure, including the pressures of traditional gender norms placed on women, rising living costs, and the difficulty of balancing career and childcare responsibilities.¹⁶ The issue of dropping birth rates has proven to be a complex challenge to overcome.

The complex issue of declining birth rates and labor needs may need to be addressed by increasing immigration. A higher influx of immigrants could help offset Taiwan's population decline and support its slowing economy. According to Taiwan Ministry of Labor (MOL) there are currently about 700,000 migrant workers in Taiwan.¹⁷ These migrant workers come mostly from four Southeast Asian countries Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Around 449,000 of these migrant workers are employed in the industrial and manufacturing industries, often referred to as the "3D" industries—dirty, dangerous, and difficult jobs, and about 237,000 working as caretakers.¹⁸ These industries which include manufacturing, construction, agriculture, fishing, and domestic care, are viewed as "undesirable" by Taiwanese and many are hesitant to perform them, resulting in a labor shortage and a strong demand for migrant laborers.¹⁹ Taiwan has significantly depended on foreign workers for those specific industry for decades, who have provided significant contributions to Taiwan's industrial and economic development.

The international student landscape in Taiwan has undergone significant change between 2021 and 2024. Taiwan's foreign student enrollment increased significantly in 2021,

¹⁵ Anna North, "You Can't Even Pay People to Have More Kids," Vox, 2023, <https://www.vox.com/23971366/declining-birth-rate-fertility-babies-children>.

¹⁶ Helen Davidson, and Chi-hui Lin, "Empty Classrooms, Silent Halls: Taiwan's Declining Birthrate Forces Schools to Close," The Guardian, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/14/taiwan-birthrate-decline-schools-close-population>.

¹⁷ Staff writer, and CNA, "Ministry of Labor Tightens Rules for Migrant Workers," Taipei Times, 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2021/08/29/2003763428>.

¹⁸ Paul Shelton, "Taiwan's Migrant Worker Issues," The European Chamber of Commerce Taiwan, 2022, <https://euroview.ecct.com.tw/category-inside.php?id=1024>.

¹⁹ Shelton

mainly from nations listed in the New Southbound Policy. This program, established in 2016, aimed to promote connections between Taiwan and Southeast Asian nations by promoting academic and professional exchanges. According to data from the Ministry of Education, the number of international students, especially those from Southeast Asian nations, increased by 84.78% between 2016 and 2019, driven by several initiatives, including increased scholarship quotas and promotional initiatives in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand.²⁰ The total number of international students hit 130,000 in 2019²¹, demonstrating Taiwan's efforts to foster global talent and its appeal as a higher education destination. However, by 2024, the foreign student landscape had changed. The overall number of overseas students attending Taiwanese institutions fell by 9.46% from 2019 to 116,038 in 2023.²² This decrease was mostly due to a significant drop in students from China, where government-imposed limits on studying in Taiwan were introduced in reaction to COVID-19 limitations and persisting cross-strait political tensions.

Motivation to Study in Taiwan

Former Premier of Taiwan, Jiang Yi-huah, highlighted Southeast Asia as the largest market for attracting international students to Taiwan.²³ To capitalize on this, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has launched a program aimed at transforming Taiwan into a regional hub for higher education. This initiative seeks to internationalize local universities, attract top

²⁰ The Ministry of Education

²¹ The Ministry of Education

²² Mainland Affairs Council Republic of China (Taiwan), "Mainland Chinese Students in Taiwan," Mainland Affairs Council Republic of China (Taiwan), 2024, https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=CA7B5FA9C0EC7005&sms=D645444CA321A4FA&s=54D121541C911FB1, (Taiwan)

²³ Executive Yuan Press Release, "Taiwan a Growing Magnet for Southeast Asian Students," Executive Yuan, 2013, <https://english.ey.gov.tw/Page/61BF20C3E89B856/0b9d7ab5-9d3b-4ebd-ad3c-6ddd8b7a60bb>.

students from emerging markets to study Chinese and other subjects, and improve both the quality and quantity of foreign students in Taiwan. Jiang stressed that this effort is part of a broader strategy to address Taiwan's shifting demographics and workforce needs. The key challenge is how to attract, retain, and effectively utilize talent to strengthen Taiwan's competitiveness in the global economy.

There are several factors which influence the motivation of Southeast Asian students choosing Taiwan to pursue higher education. A study conducted by Ma found that academic, cultural, and economic factors are often taken into consideration by international students when it comes to studying in Taiwan. However, the decision whether they will study in Taiwan or not still depends on their background, language proficiency, culture, and source of finance.²⁴ A similar study conducted through interviews with 13 New Southbound Policy students discovered that the following factors encouraged them to study in Taiwan: the short distance between Taiwan and their home country, higher living standards, a well-developed academic environment in Taiwanese universities, fewer admission requests, working opportunities after graduation, opportunities to learn Chinese, and lower tuition costs.²⁵ Moreover, in a press release, the Association of International Cultural and Educational Exchange (AICEE) Taiwan reported on the findings of its annual “International Enrollment Blue Ocean Trend Report”. This report comprises almost 2175 replies from students from 60 countries who visited the Taiwan Education Fair hosted by AICEE between January and December of 2023. The poll revealed that potential foreign students felt that studying in Taiwan has three key benefits over other countries: a high-quality education (24.75%), a safe living environment (15.4%), and the ability to learn Chinese (14.47%).

²⁴ Sandra Ai-Hsuan Ma, "Understanding the Social Construction of International Students' Migration Decisions through the Study Choices of Foreign Students in Taiwan," *人口學刊*, no. 48 (2014), <https://dx.doi.org/10.6191/JPS.2014.48.02>.

²⁵ Fang-Chung Chang, "A Study of Southeast Asian Students' Study-Abroad Experiences in Taiwan and Suggestions," *臺北市立大學學報.教育類* 48, no. 2 (2017), <https://dx.doi.org/10.6336/JUTEE.4802.001>.

When asked about the top three priorities for respondents when applying to a university overseas were scholarships and grants (24.37%), all-English courses (17.28%), and excellent quality teaching (14.45%).²⁶ In a similar poll conducted by the Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education in Taiwan (FICHET) called “Study in Taiwan Survey Report” which was administered at institutions across Taiwan from November 28 to December 21, 2022, from a total of 4,691 valid responses, it shows that overseas students were mostly attracted to Taiwan for its "friendly and welcoming culture" (44.9%), "good academic quality and reputation" (42.7%), and "potential for working or settling in Taiwan" (35.8%). In conclusion, academic, cultural, and economic factors are often taken into consideration when it comes to making decision to continue higher education in Taiwan, these factors coupled with government incentives and policies to recruit and retain international students, makes Taiwan particularly attractive to Southeast Asian students.

Challenges Encountered

The experiences of Southeast Asian migrant workers and students pursuing higher education in Taiwan are quite different in many aspects. Several challenges that Southeast Asian students have likely faced during their study in Taiwan include; stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, language barrier, and social integration.

²⁶ Association of International Cultural and Educational Exchange Taiwan, "Aicee Survey Reports That 80% of International Students Are Interested in Working in Taiwan Post-Graduation with the Future Launch of Government Program," *Association of International Cultural and Educational Exchange Taiwan* (Taiwan)2024, <https://aicee.org.tw/aicee-survey-reports-that-80-of-international-students-are-interested-in-working-in-taiwan-post-graduation-with-the-future-launch-of-government-program/>.

Language Barriers

Language has been a crucial part of communication and culture since the beginning of age. Language plays a big role in how people categorize others, it is the primary way by which stereotypes are communicated through interpersonal interaction, and socially represented by the press and other mass media.²⁷ Speaking different languages can make people seem more different and can lead to stereotypes and rejection.²⁸ That is why people have to cope with this problem and develop coping strategies that refers to how they try to learn the language of the host country. Language is an instrument of communication that facilitates understanding among people within a society. Language is a symbol of relatedness (which can increase integration) or dissimilarity (which may hinder integration), reflecting a key interpersonal class for social categorization, which can lead to stereotypes and discriminating between people within a society.²⁹ Language barriers can cause migrants to be excluded or marginalized in everyday life.³⁰ In other words, if people share a language, it can make them feel more similar and reduce hostility. All in all, learning the language of the host society is really important for fitting in because it helps people communicate effectively, reduce misunderstandings, and feel more connected to others in that society.

²⁷ Anne Maass, "Linguistic Intergroup Bias: Stereotype Perpetuation through Language," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Mark P. Zanna, vol. 31 (Academic Press, 1999).

²⁸ Katherine Collins, and Richard Clément, "Language and Prejudice Direct and Moderated Effects," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 31 (12/01 2012), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0261927X12446611>.

²⁹ H. Esser, *Migration, Language and Integration* (WZB, 2006).

³⁰ G. Beisenherz, and C. Alt, "Schriften Des Deutschen Jugendinstituts: Kinderpanel: Bd. 4. Kinderleben—Integration Durch Sprache? Band 4: Bedingungen Des Aufwachsens Von Türkischen, Russlanddeutschen Und Deutschen Kindern," in *Sprache Und Integration [Speech and Integration]* (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006).

Knowledge of the host country's language is essential for immigrants' social integration and participation in social life.³¹ Language proficiency facilitates communication with locals and the formation of interpersonal interactions and friendships in a foreign place because they influence not only the amount but also the quality of intercultural interactions.³² According to a study by Ward and Kennedy, language fluency is directly related to cultural adjustment, as it enhances connections with individuals from the host culture and reduces difficulties in sociocultural adaptation.³³ Another study found that the relationship between language proficiency and social inclusion is reciprocal: language competency increases opportunities for social participation and interaction, while greater engagement with locals also accelerates language learning.³⁴ To sum up, the importance of interactions with locals in learning the host country's language and in adapting to and integrating into society.

Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination

Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are interconnected concepts, each playing a distinct role in how we perceive and treat individuals based on their group membership. Stereotypes are 'generalizations about a group of individuals in which same qualities are attributed to practically all members of the group, regardless of the actual differences among the members'.³⁵ Prejudice refers to a biased attitude that devalues individuals because of their

³¹ S. Haug, *Sprachliche Integration Von Migranten in Deutschland [Linguistic Integration of Migrants in Germany] (Working Paper Der Forschungsgruppe Des Bundesamtes 14)* (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2008).

³² A. M. Masgoret et al., "The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology," in *Culture Learning Approach to Acculturation* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³³ Colleen Ward, and Antony Kennedy, "Acculturation Strategies, Psychological Adjustment, and Sociocultural Competence during Cross-Cultural Transitions," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 18, no. 3 (1994/06/01/ 1994), [https://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(94\)90036-1](https://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(94)90036-1).

³⁴ R. Clement, K. A. Noels, and B. Deneault, "Interethnic Contact, Identity, and Psychological Adjustment: The Mediating and Moderating Roles of Communication," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 3 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00229>.

³⁵ E. Aronson, T. D. Wilson, and R. M. Akert, *Social Psychology* (Pearson, 2010).

perceived membership in a particular social group.³⁶ It is an emotional response that stems from stereotypes. Prejudice encompasses three components: the cognitive component (stereotypes), the affective component (emotions), and the behavioral component (discrimination).³⁷ While discrimination is defined as an unjustified negative or harmful action toward the members of a group simply because of their membership in that group.³⁸ Discrimination may take many different forms, some instances include social isolation, unjust treatment or uneven opportunities, degradation or humiliation, and outright violence and aggressiveness.³⁹ To put it more simply, stereotypes are cognitive in nature, meaning they involve ideas and beliefs about a group. Prejudice is affective in nature, meaning it includes feelings or emotions toward a specific group. Discrimination is behavioral in nature, meaning it involves acts or practices that injure or disadvantage individuals or groups.

People assign their overly simplified generalization and images of a certain group because they notice there are differences between the two groups. We frequently distinguish between the in-group (a group to which we mentally identify as member and the out-group (a group with which we do not identify or members of a different group). The out-group or 'others' refers not just to other nationalities, but also to any group of individuals seen to be different, such as by ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class or gender.⁴⁰ Othering is the process by which we define and affirm our own identity by attributing negative characteristics to those in the out-group, or the "others." It reinforces the separation between "us" (the in-group) and "them" (the out-group) and is often the first step in developing

³⁶ Reprint H. Meyer, "Prejudice as Stress: Conceptual and Measurement Problems," *American journal of epidemiology*. 93, no. 2 (2003), <https://dx.doi.org/info:doi/>.

³⁷ E. Aronson, T. D. Wilson, and R. Akert, *Sozialpsychologie [Social Psychology]* (Pearson Studium, 2014).

³⁸ Aronson, Wilson, and Akert.

³⁹ Hanna BeiBert et al., "Chapter 6 Language as a Precondition for Social Integration of Migrants in the Educational Context: Evidence from Germany," (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2022).

⁴⁰ Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde, and John Kullman, *Intercultural Communication an Advanced Resource Book for Students*, ed. Christopher N. Candilin and Ronald Carter, 4th edition ed., *Intercultural Communication, 4th Edition*, ed. Christopher N. Candilin and Ronald Carter (New York: Routledge, 2021).

stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behavior.⁴¹ To summarize, stereotypes involve ideas and assumptions, prejudice involves emotional responses, and discrimination comprises damaging acts, all of which are founded in the sense of differences between groups, often reinforced by the process of othering.

There seems to be various cases of unfair treatment towards foreigners particularly Southeast Asian in Taiwan. One thing that are not often mentioned and covered is that Southeast Asian people learning experience are quite different from those coming from the West. Somehow foreigners coming from the West and white are treated much better by Taiwanese than those coming from other countries and are not white. A common example of this is the hiring policy of some kindergartens and "bushiban" English tutoring centers in Taiwan. These institutions usually favor hiring white, Western tutors to instruct their children. As a result of this preference, African Americans and even Asian Americans have experienced discrimination, displaying an obvious racial bias that disregards real language proficiency and educational ability. They have also struggled to find work in Taiwan, particularly English teaching jobs. Even if these Southeast Asians speak English fluently, they are occasionally turned down by cram schools, which prioritize applicants' ethnicities and skin colors.⁴² Public opinion on Southeast Asian immigrant groups varies with more people leaning towards the negative side.⁴³ It seems that the two main factors that affect public attitudes on immigration are the immigrants' skills and their place of origin, with preference for skilled labor. There is this stereotype about Southeast Asian in Taiwan being somehow "uncivilized and economically disadvantaged", as Southeast Asian are often

⁴¹ Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman.

⁴² Taiwan Immigrants' Global News Network, "Why Taiwan and Why Not Taiwan: Southeast Asian Students Students Coming to Taiwan Analysis," Taiwan Immigrants' Global News Network, 2019, <https://news.immigration.gov.tw/Column/Detail/8846427f-cce7-4981-be9b-8321cd1d0d8b?category=2&lang=EN>.

⁴³ Timothy S. Rich et al., "All Are Not Equal: Taiwanese Public Opinion on Southeast Asian Immigration," *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* 6, no. 1 (01 Nov. 2022 2022), <https://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/24688800-20221240>.

associated with nannies, caregivers or menial labor related jobs in Taiwan. To summarize, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are inseparable and reinforce unequal treatment based on perceived group differences. These dynamics could be seen in Taiwan's treatment of Southeast Asian immigrants, who are frequently subjected to negative societal views and discriminatory hiring practices. The demand for skilled workers, along with unfavorable opinions of some immigrant groups, particularly Southeast Asians, creates a damaging cycle of exclusion and marginalization.

Social Integration

Social integration relies on social adaptation, as adaptation forms the foundation for integration; without adapting, successful integration is unlikely. Social adaptation, refers to the adjustments that the students make in order to fit into the new environment. Particularly focuses on how individuals adapt to society's established norms and values. This process may involve developing language skills, navigating social interactions, and addressing any challenges related to discrimination or stereotyping based on their ethnicity, race or other factors. Once students adapt, they can begin the process of social integration, social integration refers to the process by which the foreign students become accepted and involved members of the receiving society. It involves various aspects such as language proficiency, cultural understanding, and participation in social activities. Moreover, social integration involves gaining access to jobs and social status, learning a new culture, acquiring rights and responsibilities, creating personal connections with members of the host society and forming a feeling of belonging to that society, and identifying with the host community.⁴⁴ In this

⁴⁴ Friedrich Heckmann, and Wolfgang Bosswick, *Integration of Migrants : Contribution of Local and Regional Authorities* (2006). <http://eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2006/22/en/1/ef0622en.pdf>.

study, social integration is operationalized through distinct, measurable actions that reflect students' levels of participation and acceptability within Taiwanese society. These behaviors might include; (1) Participation in local events such as attending and participating in Taiwanese cultural festivals, student activities, and community events, (2) Friendship formation which involves establishing genuine ties with local Taiwanese peers that go beyond superficial interactions, (3) Academic engagement by actively participating in class discussions and group projects that require interaction with local students. (4) Accessing resources which is the ability to successfully navigate local systems such as healthcare, administrative procedures, and transportation.

A survey conducted by "GOH-Migrants," the migrant aid center of The Garden of Hope Foundation—a non-governmental, non-profit organization focused on defending the rights of migrants, particularly foreign workers and international students—revealed insightful findings. The survey involved 100 foreign students, with the results showing that 50 percent of respondents expressed a desire to find work in Taiwan after graduation, while the other 50 percent stated they did not wish to stay. Those who did not want to remain in Taiwan cited several reasons, including language barriers, a lack of familiarity with Taiwan's work culture, and Taiwanese employers' lack of understanding of the standards for hiring foreigners. Many also expressed concerns about encountering difficulties in a Chinese-speaking work environment. Some respondents also reported difficulties integrating into Taiwanese society, a "difficult" workplace culture, insufficient salaries, and job limitations for foreigners. The Garden of Hope Foundation's migrant services director stated that before students can integrate, they must feel 'understood and respected' first.⁴⁵ Social adaptation and integration are essential components for international students who want to succeed in a new

⁴⁵ Yang Yuan-ting, and Jason Pan, "Poll Spotlights Foreign Students' Issues," Taipei Times, 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2022/11/06/2003788377>.

environment. Adaptation, which includes overcoming language barriers, cultural differences, and social challenges, is required for effective integration. The Garden of Hope Foundation's poll results illustrate the challenges international students encounter in Taiwan, ranging from language barriers to a lack of workplace inclusion. Addressing these challenges and making students feel understood and valued is important for creating a supportive atmosphere to integrate into Taiwanese society.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the impact of language barriers, stereotypes, and social integration on Southeast Asian students at Wenzao Ursuline University of Language in Taiwan. It explores how language barriers influence social integration, how stereotypes affect their sense of belonging, and the coping strategies they use to overcome these challenges. The goal is to provide detailed insights into their unique experiences, contributing empirical data to the field of intercultural communication.

Research Design

A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was selected to gather rich, descriptive data on the experiences of Southeast Asian students. This method allows participants to express their personal stories and perspectives in detail. Conducting in-depth interviews provides flexibility to explore unanticipated insights, address sensitive topics, and examine the nuanced ways in which stereotypes, language challenges, and social integration intersect.

The chosen methodology aligns with the research objectives by prioritizing a deep, participant-centered exploration of complex personal experiences. By employing in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this study captures the relationship between language, culture, and integration, contributing empirical data and theoretical insights to the literature on intercultural communication and international student experiences.

Data Source

Conducted in Kaohsiung City, Taiwan, the study takes place at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, a higher education institution known for its focus on languages and international education. The university attracts a diverse student body, including local Taiwanese students and international students from various countries. The institution provides an academic and social environment where students from different cultural backgrounds socialize, study, and engage in activities together. The research setting at Wenzao encompasses both academic and non-academic spaces such as classrooms, lecture halls, libraries, dormitories, campus grounds, cafeterias, and student groups. Additionally, the study extends to off-campus venues where students interact with the local Taiwanese population, including neighborhood restaurants, cultural events, and entertainment venues.

Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Taiwan is an ideal location for this research due to several factors. Firstly, the university hosts a diverse student body, including a substantial number of students from Southeast Asia, offering a rich environment to explore the experiences of individuals from various cultural backgrounds. Additionally, Wenzao's commitment to promoting intercultural understanding through its activities and programs provides a valuable setting for assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives. The university also grants access to essential stakeholders such as students, professors, and administrators, facilitating data collection and engagement with key aspects of the research topic.

Founded in 1966 by Ursuline nuns of the Roman Union, Wenzao is Taiwan's first and only university dedicated to language studies, renowned for its high-quality educational offerings.⁴⁶ This reason makes Wenzao a unique academic institution due to its dedication to

⁴⁶ Languagecert, "Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages," LANGUAGECERT, 2024, <https://www.languagecert.org/en/exam-types/test-centre-exams/asia/taiwan/wenzao-ursuline-university-of-languages>.

the study of foreign languages. The university fosters a multicultural environment where international and local Taiwanese students study together, enhancing its suitability for this research.

In recent years, Wenzao has seen a significant increase in international student enrollment, largely due to its English-taught programs and international partnerships. The university collaborates with 280 institutions across 21 countries in Asia, the Americas, Europe, and Australia, facilitating student and faculty exchanges, study tours, and research collaborations. These partnerships further strengthen Wenzao's role in advancing Taiwan's 2030 bilingual policy, positioning it as an ideal site for this study.

Moreover, Wenzao actively promotes multiculturalism through various cultural events and initiatives. In 2019, the university established the Southeast Asian Studies Department, which houses a vast collection of resources, including Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Thai books, cultural artifacts, and faculty with expertise in Southeast Asian studies.

The study's target population comprises Southeast Asian students enrolled at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Taiwan. This includes students from Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian countries who are pursuing higher education at Wenzao, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level and across various disciplines. While the sample itself are the individual Southeast Asian students within the university community, including their backgrounds, experiences, coping mechanisms, and interactions with local Taiwanese students and faculty. Their perceptions, challenges, and adaptations serve as the main point for understanding the broader phenomenon of international student experiences in the context of Taiwanese higher education.

The inclusion criteria for this study focus on full-time Southeast Asian students at Wenzao (from countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines) who are currently enrolled and willing to participate. Wenzao's distinct emphasis on language

instruction may attract students with stronger language skills or unique coping mechanisms compared to those studying technical subjects at larger universities, potentially influencing their experiences. Furthermore, the geographic setting of Kaohsiung offers different social and cultural dynamics than northern Taiwan's metropolitan areas, such as Taipei, which provide greater cultural diversity, opportunities, and challenges. For qualitative research examining Southeast Asian students' experiences with stereotypes, language barriers, and social integration, a non-probabilistic sampling method will be employed. Since these students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, possess varying levels of Mandarin proficiency, study across different disciplines, and experience different degrees of social integration, it is crucial to ensure that the sample accurately reflects this diversity to capture a wide range of perspectives.

A sample size of 8-10 participants might suffice to reach data saturation and achieve a deep understanding of the subject matter, interviewing a smaller number of participants allows for a deeper exploration of individual experiences and perceptions. This approach enables a thorough analysis of the qualitative data collected from each participant, uncovering subtle insights. Qualitative research prioritizes understanding deeply over covering a wide range of participants, making smaller sample sizes suitable and common.

Purposive sampling will be used to select participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, such as nationality, putting emphasis on participants who can provide rich, in-depth insights into the phenomenon under study, with English proficiency being an important consideration. This include selecting participants who have faced significant language barriers, stereotypes, and other challenges with social integration. Beside purposive sampling, snowball sampling- a method suitable for hard-to-access populations—are also used to reach a broader range of participants due to the researcher's limited knowledge to a few students within the department. It is achieved by asking initial

participants to refer other individuals who may have valuable perspectives or experiences related to the topic.

Potential participants are identified by asking the teachers for university records or databases of Southeast Asian students and through announcements on social media and in classrooms. Samples are drawn from various departments to ensure proportional representation of each Southeast Asian country. Once suitable volunteers have been identified, informed consent will be obtained by explaining the study's purpose, anonymity policies, voluntary participation, and the ability to withdraw at any time. Obtaining informed consent is crucial, as discussing sensitive issues may induce stress or discomfort among participants. Therefore, consent forms will be made available online or in person, and participants can express their approval by signing the form.

Data Collection

Interviews will be organized at appropriate times for participants and carried out in-person in relaxed, private locations on campus (e.g., conference rooms, study areas) or via secure online platforms (e.g., LINE, Google Meet) if in-person sessions are not possible. Each interview will take about 30–60 minutes. A well prepared interview guide with open-ended questions will be used, providing for freedom in exploring related topics that arise throughout the interview. All interviews will be audio recorded with the participants' permission to guarantee correct transcription and analysis.

In total there are 9 interviewees who participated in this study. Table 1 represents their demographic information. The names were not disclosed due to confidentiality reasons.

Table 1 Demography of Interviewed Students

#	Age	Sex	Field	Region
1	18-24	Female	International Affairs	Indonesia
2	18-24	Female	International Affairs	Indonesia
3	18-24	Female	International Affairs	The Philippines
4	18-24	Male	English Language	The Philippines
5	25-34	Female	Foreign Language Instruction	Vietnam
6	18-24	Male	Southeast Asian Studies	Vietnam
7	18-24	Female	Business and Economics	Thailand
8	18-24	Female	Business and Economics	Thailand
9	18-24	Male	English Language	Myanmar

(Source: Organized by the Author)

The study uses thematic analysis as the primary data analysis technique. Thematic analysis is the most suitable technique for this study as it could thoroughly discover and analyze patterns in qualitative data, resulting in a complete knowledge of the students' experiences with language barriers, stereotypes, and social integration. This approach involves identifying, evaluating, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data. The procedure begins with familiarization, which involves transcribing the interviews and reviewing the data several times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the contents.

The process begins with familiarization, which includes transcribing interviews and reviewing the data multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. The next step is generating codes, where segments of interview data are labeled with relevant tags. For example, codes like "language barriers," "stereotypes and bias," and "academic and social barriers" correspond to Research Question 1, which focuses on students' social integration

challenges. Other codes, such as "coping strategies for language barriers" and "language improvement for academic success," relate to Research Question 2. Codes like "limited interaction with local students," "bonds with fellow international students," and "sense of belonging" are tied to Research Question 3.

After coding, the data is organized into broader themes based on recurring patterns. These themes represent more abstract concepts derived from the data and are categorized by each research question, ensuring that all relevant information is included. Afterward, the themes are developed, with explicit descriptions and names assigned to each, for example, "Language Barriers and Social Exclusion". The last step is to write the academic paper by selecting clear and relevant examples, and linking the analysis back to the study objectives.

DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews conducted with 9 Southeast Asian students and addressing the research questions presented earlier. The data revealed key themes related to the intercultural challenges Southeast Asian students faced including; “Barriers Experienced”, “The Impact of Language Barriers on Social Integration and Coping Strategies”, and “The Impact of Interaction Levels on the Sense of Belonging”. Each theme delves into numerous aspects of students' experiences and addresses the research questions presented earlier.

Barriers Experienced

International students face multiple challenges as they adjust to a new environment. In this study, Southeast Asian students identified 2 major challenges to their integration in Taiwan, mainly language barriers and cultural stereotypes and bias.

Language Barriers

One of the most significant challenges reported by students was the language barrier, particularly for those who came to Taiwan with limited Mandarin proficiency. Most interviewees expressed the difficulty of navigating life in Taiwan without basic Mandarin proficiency. Although Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages offers many English-taught courses, allowing international students to study without extensive Chinese language skills, daily life still demands some Mandarin fluency. The language of the host country is crucial for survival as a foreigner. Students cannot expect locals to speak English, as they are living in a Mandarin-speaking environment. Learning the local language is essential for adaptation and integration into Taiwanese society. Without this language proficiency, even completing

small tasks, such as purchasing groceries or ordering food, becomes challenging, leading to anxiety and loss of confidence. An interviewee vividly described her experience;

“When I first came to Taiwan, even simple tasks like going to a restaurant were hard. I didn’t know what to say, so I relied on pointing at pictures or asking friends for help. I cannot speak Chinese well, I always have this fear that they’re going to ask me questions and I don’t know how to say something. <...> I couldn’t even say simple things like ‘sorry’ or ‘100’ in Chinese. This made me nervous, especially during my first year.” - Indonesian 1

Other students echoed similar sentiments and frustrations emphasizing the mental toll of navigating life in Taiwan without fluent Mandarin, and the limitations imposed by their lack of language skills

“For my daily life, it is mentally draining and it impacted my confidence especially in terms of skill, I am not confident at all. <...> I used to work with people from Taiwan, and I’m like a foreigner, especially those who don’t understand Chinese at all. At that time, I went camping, so it’s like our first time camping together. But because I don’t understand the language, I don’t know much. So if I understood Chinese, I feel like I could be more satisfied than them. Because when I asked them to explain, they also explained for a long time, they are like ‘I don’t know.’” - Indonesia 2

It can be mentally draining when people can’t understand what the other side is trying to say neither express yourself in a foreign language, furthermore things can get lost in translation. It is understandable that people prefer to speak with people who speaks the same language as we do. It is easier to express your feelings and thoughts, and the other person would also be able to understand you and feel you.

“I didn’t want to rely on my friends for everything, but I had no choice. Even going to the supermarket was difficult because everything is in Chinese. <...> before, I really feel special when I don’t speak Chinese because people would, you know, think that you’re

foreign. But, right now, I feel ashamed whenever I talk to Taiwanese people and they don't understand me. Like, I have the regret, oh, I should have studied Chinese during my first year. Seriously. And this impacted my daily life because one of my church members told me that I feel special. Like, I see myself as a VIP. So, my relationship with them since my first year did not really grow because there's the language barrier. And then when I say to them, 'Oh, ting budong, jeng wen buhao', they would just eventually stop talking to me and then I will just sit there in the church. But, like, right now, I'm really trying to break the barrier". – The Philippines 3

The student said that even though her friends were happy to help her, she felt bad for troubling them and helping her all the time isn't a long term solution. She is also aware of her own views and felt regret because of her actions. Hence, she is now trying to break the language barrier by studying Chinese by herself.

"I'm coping the language barrier right now. I'm studying Chinese by myself because I think it's better for me to study by myself. I find it very interesting right now, Chinese. My interest in Taiwan, in Taiwanese people and Taiwanese culture are increasing right now when I study Chinese." – The Philippines 3

Furthermore, the students faced not only challenges in everyday life but also difficulties in their academic journey due to the prevalence of Mandarin in the classroom. Taiwanese people mostly speak Mandarin so most people do not speak English well. Courses are also mostly offered in Mandarin. Although it is getting better now that Taiwan has the ambition to turn its nation to a bilingual country by 2030. Government policy in education and the EMI courses offered in universities including Wenzao, has shown that Taiwan is taking this policy seriously.

Foreigners can't take classes offered in Mandarin due to their language skills. This was partly due to no requirements or regulations to master Chinese before enrolling to the

university. However, this EMI courses proved to be a double-edged sword. Although, it is true that EMI courses have enabled foreigners to take classes without any Mandarin proficiency, it also made foreigners sometimes feel excluded.

Even a student with prior Mandarin experience, found it difficult to articulate their thoughts in an academic setting:

"My Chinese level was B2, so daily tasks were manageable, but I couldn't express myself clearly in academic settings. I had difficulties in communication with professors at school because I didn't know how to express my idea clearly and concisely." - Vietnam 5

This highlights the gap between everyday conversational Mandarin and the advanced language skills required to succeed in a university environment. While some international students may have enough Mandarin proficiency for daily interactions, communicating in academic discussions remains a challenge.

Similarly, another student shared that the unexpected switch between English and Mandarin during lectures created confusion for international students without much Mandarin proficiency.

"I didn't know Chinese when I came here. It was hard to understand what the professors were saying, and I often felt lost. In class, if the professor switched to Chinese, I would be lost. I missed key points and sometimes didn't know what the homework was about because I couldn't follow the Mandarin instructions. I understood the English parts, but when they switched to Chinese, I was left behind. It felt like the class wasn't really meant for us international students." – Thailand 7

Additionally, despite being enrolled in English taught programs, many administrative processes and informal class discussions were in Mandarin, making the problem worse, another student pointed out,

"Sometimes, even though my courses were in English, the professors would give extra explanations in Chinese, and I couldn't understand. It felt like I was missing out on important information." – Indonesia 1

Wenzao is known for offering EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) courses. However, sometimes the teachers will switch to Mandarin to make the Taiwanese students understand better, this makes international students sometimes felt lost and unable to follow the lectures. The frequent and unpredictable switching between English and Mandarin during lectures causes confusion among international students with limited Mandarin abilities. This inconsistency in language used in class hinders understanding and makes it difficult for students to properly grasp complicated topics. This showed that, while EMI is a promising initiative, it is still in its early stages and may face implementation challenges. Taiwan's EMI program requires further improvements to guarantee that instructional language use is consistent and facilitates all students, regardless of their Mandarin proficiency.

One of the responders also said even though her program was EMI, she found that some courses were offered only in Chinese, which limited her academic opportunities.

She stated, *"There were classes I couldn't take because they were fully in Chinese."* - Indonesia 1

This mismatch between expectations and the reality of EMI courses limited the students' academic engagement and made them feel disconnected from their academic experience. International students had to figure it out either by themselves or by asking other peers who understand Mandarin to help them translate. What is more, sometimes international students are late to get new information about administrative processes and informal class discussions due to the lag.

Cultural Stereotypes and Bias

Furthermore, several interviewees reported experiencing cultural stereotypes and bias, which added to their struggles in Taiwan. These stereotypes often arose from simple interactions where locals asked where they were from. The questions of “Where do you come from?” are commonly asked by curious locals -often more advanced in age, when they see foreigners or after hearing a different accent and languages spoken. This simple questions of asking where someone comes from could be a determinant on how the locals view and treat them.

“In educational environments, there are no stereotypes or assumptions about Southeast Asian students. But out in society, there are still some elderly people who have a negative view of foreigners in general and Southeast Asian in particular.” – Vietnam 6

For example, a student experienced direct stereotyping when an elderly Taiwanese woman assumed negative intentions about her simply based on her nationality:

“A local woman suggested that I might have come to Taiwan with dishonest intentions just because I am Vietnamese. It was hurtful to see that people have such low opinions of us”. – Vietnam 6

An interviewee also noticed a subtle form of bias, saying,

“Some Taiwanese people still look down on Southeast Asians. They think we’re poor and incapable, but it feels more like ignorance than direct discrimination. Every country is not always perfect. Sometimes, I want to answer back when I hear some discrimination, but I choose to remain calm and kind. However, the majority of people here are accepting and friendly”. - The Philippines 4

The respondent noted on the difficulties of coping with subtle prejudices, noting that while some Taiwanese people may look down on Southeast Asians, this is frequently due to

ignorance- a lack of understanding or exposure to Southeast Asian cultures rather than deliberate hostility.

He also shared that some Taiwanese students underestimated him because of his nationality, stating,

“I had classmates who didn’t think I was capable of doing good work because I’m Filipino. I had to work twice as hard to prove them wrong.” - The Philippines 4

However, he also noted that once people got to know him, they realized their assumptions were wrong.

“Because we’re Indonesian, so we’re looked down on because most of Indonesians here are migrant workers.” - Indonesia 2

A student from Thailand also shared her experience of being stereotyped based on her appearance:

“Since I’m Thai and have fair skin, which differs from what Taiwanese people usually expect, they often ask me where I’m from. When I say I’m from Thailand, they ask why I’m so fair-skinned, as they believe Thais should be darker. They say I don’t look Thai and often ask if I’m of Chinese or Taiwanese descent because they associate fair skin with Chinese or Taiwanese people. They also tend to believe that people from Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines are usually darker-skinned. I usually get these questions from older people, like grandmothers and grandfathers, which I understand as they belong to an older generation. At the same time, younger people sometimes ask questions, which I find to be a rather thoughtless. They often assume Southeast Asians are poor or have negative traits. Being Thai, I also get asked what my gender is because Thailand is known for its transgender community. I find this question inappropriate, regardless of whether I’m a woman, man, or transgender. Even if I were transgender, it’s not a question that should be asked”. – Thailand

7

Another interviewee also shared her thoughts about the different attitudes between how Taiwanese treat Westerners and how they treat Southeast Asians. She felt there's this sense of superiority and a little bit looking down on Southeast Asian because she noticed that locals seemed more interested in talking to Westerners.

“When they talk to us, there's always a sense that we are beneath them. They respect white people more than us. They don't treat us as equals.” – Indonesia 2

This difference in views and treatment between Southeast Asian and White people are also felt by another student

“In our university, there's a department that helps international students, but over the past two years, it seems like they haven't helped much. They focus more on promoting and assisting white students, which makes us feel overlooked and discriminated against when they ignore our requests for help”. – Thailand 7

It seems that there is an invisible line dividing the social hierarchy among foreigners, with Westerners, especially white individuals, positioned at the top. This hierarchy frequently results in preferential treatment for Westerners, who are perceived as more desirable or superior, both socially and academically. Programs and resources designed to help foreign students often prioritize the interests of Western students, leaving Southeast Asian students feeling left out or ignored. This notion of a hierarchical structure creates feelings of exclusion and discrimination, strengthening social and cultural challenges that hinder international students from integrating and receiving equal treatment.

Moreover, these stereotypes could escalate to actions which are unfair treatments. This differential treatment extended into the professional world, particularly in the case of discriminatory hiring practices. Several interviewees shared their experiences of being rejected from English-teaching positions solely based on their appearance or nationality in cram schools (bushiban)

“I wanted to be an English teacher before. Before I got this job, there was one time where I wanted to be an English teacher. So, I applied through my friend because, my friend told me, like, oh, my company right now is in need of an English teacher. Do you want to, be an English teacher? And I was like, of course. I wanted to. So, I told them, I introduced myself through line. This is not through, like, an in-person meet. Through line chat. And they were like, oh, no, I don't want you because you don't look white. Because I, because of my appearance, because I look Asian. Um, they were just like, 'oh, no, no, no, no, no'. We cannot have this girl. Like that. And I felt like that was pretty unfair because I think when it comes to, like, English teaching, I think the experiences and also your abilities. The abilities are more important than your physical appearance. Because I feel like I'm more than eligible for that. So, at that time, I felt like, this is, like, my first racist experience.

This might suggest something deeper on people's fundamental view of culture and the method in which they develop specific 'national culture' might play a part on the construction of this stereotype⁴⁷. People have their own definition of 'Western' culture, which features they consider essentially Western. English is the perfect example of this, English is seen as an attribute which essentially and considered belongs to White people, so makes sense if Taiwanese are more willing to hire white people rather than people from other ethnicity. Native-speakerism is a prominent ideology within English Language Teaching (ELT), defined by the concept that 'native-speaker' instructors represent a 'Western culture' from which arise both the principles of the English language and English language teaching methods.⁴⁸

However, they also expressed their understanding of the situation, acknowledging the business aspect of cram schools:

⁴⁷ Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman.

⁴⁸ Adrian Holliday, *The Struggle to Teach English as an International Language* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

“But, at the same time, I just thought, yeah, I just thought, you know, maybe, I mean, a cram school is still a business. So, I think maybe they're just trying to make their business sell more. So, they're just trying to, um, get higher students. They prefer hiring white people over than those who are actually eligible for that job”. – Indonesia 1

The student also expressed that she could not continue to be an English teacher if you are not born or if you do not hold a passport that is from a country in which they speak English natively, you cannot be an English teacher.

“And actually, this goes for the future because after I graduate, I talked to some of my seniors and I found out that even in the Taiwan, even in Taiwan's policy itself, it says that, um, if you are not born or if you do not hold a passport that is from a country in which they speak English natively, you cannot be an English teacher. So, as an Indonesian, I cannot be an English teacher here at all.” – Indonesia 1

This later proved to be true, citing from Taiwan’s Ministry of Education it is written on the requirements of eligibility that “The official or common language of the nation (as shown on the passport) from which the applicant is from must be English or endorsed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan)”.⁴⁹

However, another student from the Philippines encountered the same issue when applying to be an English teacher at a private cram school even though she is from the Philippines which one of their official languages besides Filipino is English.

“I barely experience racism. Even inside the school. When I applied for Bushiban, I did not get accepted because they told me they want someone from Europe, from America. <...> We're like in Asia, like, and we're like the closest country in Taiwan. Why won't you

⁴⁹ Republic of China (Taiwan) Ministry of Education, "Ministry of Education Recruits More Talented English Teaching Professionals from Overseas in 2024," Ministry of Education, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2024, <https://english.moe.gov.tw/cp-117-39536-449ce-1.html>.

just, you know. The fact that this is more easier and like more convenient for, for Taiwanese. The racism, the challenge, racism”. – The Philippines 3

Another Filipino student also shared his opinion on this issue

“A few years ago, I watched an interview about a Filipino coming to Taiwan to teach English, not only Filipinos, but Southeast Asian English teachers. The politician said that Taiwanese students wouldn't like it and would be shocked, especially since Filipinos are often stereotyped as nannies or caregivers abroad, or from a lower class of the society. Not only Filipinos, but all of us Southeast Asians experience stereotyping and discrimination in Taiwan. And that's something that we should correct because that is not true”. - Philippines 4

While it is true that many Southeast Asians in Taiwan work as nannies, caretakers, and in other manual labor jobs, it is unfair to generalize this to all Southeast Asians. Generalizing in this manner ignores individual differences and reinforces stereotypes. Local misconceptions, such as the notion that migrant workers have "low education" or "no talent," increase inequality.⁵⁰ This unequal treatment is a daily reality for Taiwan's migrant workers, as employment and immigration regulations frequently treat them as second-class citizens. In addition, media coverage further reinforces this popular opinion, contributing to these prejudices.⁵¹

Other students also shared their experience of being treated unfairly in the professional world.

⁵⁰ Randy Mulyanto, "Taiwan Embraces Southeast Asian Migrant Workers, One Book at a Time," Lowy Institute, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/taiwan-embraces-southeast-asian-migrant-workers-one-book-time>.

⁵¹ Cat Thomas, "How the Portrayal of Migrant Workers in Taiwan's Media Shapes the Perception of Their Role in Society," Asian American Journalists Association, 2022, <https://anda-aaja.com/how-the-portrayal-of-migrant-workers-in-taiwans-media-shapes-the-perception-of-their-role-in-society/>.

“There's one time I couldn't do an internship abroad because I'm not Taiwanese. Plus I just found out that most of the intern positions I want are only for locals even though some are open to international students but they are favored towards locals.”- Myanmar 9

“In my opinion, nowadays people have treated each other more equally between locals and foreigners. But somewhere there are still many people who treat foreigners unfairly, such as: Salary issues - unfair salary between locals and foreigners, insurance policies for workers or mandatory conditions when wanting to live in Taiwan. If we look at it from the perspective of students or foreign workers, it is quite unfair, but if we look at it from another perspective, students or foreign workers cannot ask for too much when coming to another country to study and work. If possible, ignore all those rules and evaluate working capacity according to each person's capacity, I think it will be much better”. – Vietnam 6

When faced with rude stereotypes and unfair situations, most of the students usually just ignore the rude comments and kept quiet, because they felt that it wasn't their place to change the attitudes of locals:

“I just let it be because I feel like, um, this is not my country. It's not something that I have to change. I feel like they'll, the people here will change if they want to. If they're open to this kind of, if they're open to foreigners, then they will change themselves. I feel like they can see it themselves. I don't need to really force, sit upon them because I, yeah, because I don't like to, surround myself with negative people either. So, I mean, if they, if they want to be racist, then that's fine. Then, okay, then I don't need to, it's fine. I'll just try to find other people who are not. Because not all Taiwanese are like this. I don't waste time trying to prove myself to them. So, if they don't like me, then that's okay. I don't care. <...> I will not defend myself. If I know that it's not that harsh, if I can handle it, I will just let it pass. I have no experience here in Taiwan that they go beyond. So, so yes. If I can handle it, I will, I don't waste time trying to prove myself to them.” -the Philippines 4

“I just ignore it most of the time cause I'm sick of trying to educate them. <...> I believe it takes time to address this kind of issue.” – Myanmar 9

“Most of the time, I don't do much about these comments; I usually turn them into a joke. If someone talks about my country being poor or not good, I might ask them, jokingly, if they've never traveled abroad. In these situations, there's not much I can do, and I can't get angry because they simply don't know enough about other country. <...> I usually don't do much in response and just laugh it off because I don't want to create a negative atmosphere in the conversation. However, there are times when I've had to report someone to people with authority to manage that person's behavior”. – Thailand 7

In the case of one particular student, she believes that she needs to prove herself so that others won't look down on her *“I show them my abilities, what I can do and why I should have their respect”*. – Vietnam 5

The experiences of Southeast Asian students at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages revealed significant barriers in their academic and everyday life. These challenges includes language challenges, cultural stereotypes, and differential treatment. Although English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses has enabled international students to study without needing Mandarin proficiency, education institutions has not fully fathom and addressed the complicated nature of daily life and academic engagement in a predominantly Mandarin-speaking society. Many students feel disconnected and excluded due to the gap between conversational language skills and advanced proficiency required for academic and professional settings. This issue is further worsen by the prevalence of cultural stereotypes and unfair treatments towards Southeast Asian students. Many students shared incidents of hostility based on their ethnicity or appearance which followed to the professional world, where they are frequently treated differently than Western students, particularly in sectors such as English-teaching professions.

The Impact of Language Barriers on Social Integration and Coping Strategies

Language barriers significantly influence students' ability to navigate daily tasks and hinder their social integration into Taiwanese society. This issue affects various aspects of life, including participation in local events such as cultural festivals, student activities, and community gatherings; forming meaningful friendships with Taiwanese peers beyond superficial interactions; engaging academically through active involvement in class discussions and group projects; and accessing essential resources like healthcare, administrative systems, and public transportation.

When asked about their participation in local events or social gatherings, students shared mixed experiences. One student stated:

"I went to a lot of social events open to both foreigners and Taiwanese. However, even there, foreigners would talk to foreigners, and Taiwanese would mingle with Taiwanese. Although I did encounter some extroverted individuals who socialized with both groups, these friendships remained superficial." – Thailand 8

Another student reflected on their involvement in departmental activities and cultural events:

"In school, I participated in our department's student association, which had both foreign and Taiwanese members. We held weekly meetings, and I think this helped me socialize more with Taiwanese students because we had to discuss things. I also joined a multicultural camping event organized by Wenzao, but the language barrier remained a significant problem. To be honest, I don't want to go through that again." – Indonesia 2

Some students found limited success in cultural events designed to bridge gaps:

"I participated in events offered by SOSA. They were helpful in learning more about Taiwanese culture, such as visiting a Taiwanese Aboriginal village, which deepened my

understanding of the culture. However, my Mandarin skills prevented me from communicating effectively with others." – Indonesia 1

The language barrier also affected students' academic engagement, particularly in class discussions and group projects. One student shared their feelings of alienation:

"In terms of academics, there's none because my class is entirely taught in EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction). When working in groups with Taiwanese students, I feel nervous because they speak Chinese all the time, which I don't understand. I feel they should be more mindful, but honestly, it's exhausting." – Indonesia 2

Conversely, another student described how English-taught classes encouraged participation:

"My classes are all taught in English, and most teachers push students to answer in class by giving extra points, especially in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) classes. This motivates foreigners to participate more because we often have stronger English skills and are more ambitious." – Thailand 8

Many students struggled to build meaningful relationships with local peers due to the language barrier, leaving them feeling alienated and disconnected. Efforts to form friendships often faltered due to a lack of fluency in Mandarin. For instance:

"At first, I tried to talk to my Taiwanese classmates, but the friendships didn't last. It's hard to maintain relationships when you can't fully communicate." – Indonesia 1

"I wanted to make friends with the locals, but the language barrier made it impossible. Even when I tried, they would switch to Chinese after a while, and I couldn't keep up." – Thailand 7

"In the beginning, I mostly kept to myself because I couldn't speak well enough to hold a conversation. I felt like an outsider, even in class." – Vietnam 6

Limited Mandarin proficiency, coupled with the local students' attitudes and their limited English skills, made it challenging to form connections that extended beyond brief interactions.

Navigating life in Taiwan requires accessing resources such as healthcare, administrative systems, and public transportation. Although Taiwan offers a robust healthcare system and well-developed public transportation, language barriers remain an obstacle. For example:

"When I first came to Taiwan, I was so anxious taking the bus by my own I always had to go with my friends as we couldn't really figure out how it works, thankfully they provided English translation, I can take the bus and MRT by myself now." – Thailand 7

"The healthcare system here is very good compared to the Philippines, but it's hard for me to communicate with the doctor or administrative staff, so I need to go with a friend who can speak Mandarin." – The Philippines 3

While Taiwan's infrastructure is convenient, accessing these services often requires at least basic Mandarin proficiency.

To cope with the huge problem of language barriers the students employed their own strategies and utilized a variety of tools, including practical instruments and peer support.

"Practice and also just try to be brave. That's basically my strategy. And also try to listen to Taiwanese people. I am not the type of person to learn languages by book. I don't, I mean, it's easier for me to learn by book, but I just do not have enough motivation to get a book and read it. So I usually, how I improve my Chinese is by listening to people and also trying to speak with them. I think I pick up easier by listening to how they talk to me or listening to other people's conversation with Taiwanese people. And that's when I just mimic the way they say, they do things because I feel like, some Taiwanese people, the way they

Speak is not by the book. Basically, my coping mechanism is just to try to listen to what they say, mimic what they say, and try to have more experience in talking to them". – Indonesia 1

"In addition to trying to study by myself every day, I often use a small notebook, always carry it with me so that when I encounter new words that I don't know, I can note them down. And I also make a few friends to practice my listening and speaking skills every day, and thanks to that, I can help my listening and speaking skills to improve." – Vietnam 6

"Every time when I don't understand Chinese, my main support is my friends. They always explain difficult Chinese vocabulary by using simple words that help me to understand, and this also allows me to learn more new vocabulary. Sometimes, I quickly translate on the internet or dictionary". – Thailand 8

Access to peers who are willing to practice language skills and offer guidance is invaluable, as it often accelerates learning more effectively than independent study. It is widely recognized that textbook language differs significantly from everyday conversation. Textbooks typically provide a standardized version of the language, emphasizing proper grammar, pronunciation, and sentence structure. In contrast, real-life interactions often include slang and colloquialisms that are not covered in textbooks, making it challenging for students to adapt. Engaging in practical language practice with friends allows students to clarify complex terms and receive explanations in more understandable ways, helping them bridge the gap that textbooks may miss.

Besides, traditionally writing down notes and practicing with friends, they also made use of current technologies ranging from translation apps, language learning apps, to media. One of the students shared that she relied heavily on translation apps such as Google Translate to help her navigate daily tasks. The app is very useful to her and is an integral part of her life in Taiwan.

“Google Translate saved me in so many situations. Without it, I wouldn’t have been able to get by in simple conversations.” – Indonesia 2

Another student also mentioned that language-learning apps like Pleco and listening to podcasts are very beneficial and has helped her to improve her vocabulary:

“I use Pleco to check words I don’t know, and podcasts help me get used to the way people talk here.” – Thailand 7

An interviewee shared that she used unconventional ways such as entertainment media like YouTube and Netflix to improve her listening comprehension. Which helped her practice Mandarin in a more interesting and engaging way.

“I started watching Chinese movies and shows to help me understand how people really speak. It’s different from what you learn in the classroom.” – Vietnam 5

It can be seen that language barriers played a significant role in the process of social integration of Southeast Asian students in Taiwan. Despite their best efforts to befriend locals, the students often found that their limited Mandarin skills prevented them from forming meaningful connections with local Taiwanese students which leaves them feeling excluded and isolated. The good news is that these students have shown resilience in addressing these challenges by employing a variety of strategies to overcome language barriers. From using traditional methods like note-taking and peer practice, as well as modern tools such as translation apps, language-learning apps, to even utilizing media like YouTube and Netflix to improve their Mandarin skills. These methods proved to be fruitful because it has helped them to improve their listening and speaking skills, allowing them to interact and communicate better with the locals.

The Impact of Interaction Levels on the Sense of Belonging

The degree of interaction with local Taiwanese students has a tremendous impact on Southeast Asian students' sense of belonging. Many interviewees expressed their desire to form friendships with local peers but found it challenging due to language barriers and limited opportunities. The absence of shared language skills hindered students' attempts to interact with local peers, resulting to feelings of exclusion and loneliness. The students struggled to build long-term ties when conversations frequently went back to Mandarin. Thus, when asked about their sense of belonging in Taiwan, most of the respondents expressed that the lack of meaningful interaction with local Taiwanese students have affected their feeling of belonging.

A student shared that despite her best efforts to connect with local students, language differences kept her from forming close friendships and that their conversations never go beyond greetings. She explained,

“I would say ‘hello,’ but we never got beyond that. There was no real connection because of the language barrier.” – Indonesia 1

Another student also mentioned her disappointment in not being able to bond with local students:

“It’s hard to talk to them when they switch to Mandarin. I felt like I wasn’t part of the group, even in group projects.” – The Philippines 3

Another student described a similar experience:

“The locals were friendly at first, but when it came to real conversations, they would switch to Chinese, and I couldn’t follow. It made me feel like I wasn’t really included.” – Thailand 7

The limited interactions with local students reinforced their feelings of being an outsider and sense of exclusion. Due to that reason, many of the students found comfort in

connecting with other international students, particularly those from Southeast Asia who faced similar challenges. Their shared experiences brought them together. A student explained:

“It’s easier to connect with other international students because we all understand what it’s like. We help each other out.” -The Philippines 4

We face the same challenges, so it’s easier to relate to one another. We understand each other better than the locals do.” – Myanmar 9

These friendships with friends from Southeast Asia who faced similar challenges helped them feel less isolated and felt included and accepted. This sense of connection contributed to a better sense of belonging among the foreign student group. Thus, it is understandable that when asked about their sense of belonging in Taiwan, many expressed negative responses,

“I feel at home with my Southeast Asian friends, but I still feel like an outsider in the local community. It’s hard to feel fully integrated when you can’t speak the language.” – Thailand 7

“Well, I don't belong here, but I found a place here. <...> Because I belong in the Philippines, of course I don't really feel belong in Taiwan, but I know that I have a place here. And my sense of belonging is: it's not really that similar when you compare to my home country, because I still feel foreign to Taiwan. There's still a lot of things that I don't know about Taiwan because I did not find effort to overcome the barrier”. – The Philippines 3

“Everything is good until now, and the fact that i feel like I’m not very integrated with the local community is still my language barrier, my understanding is still lacking to be able to understand everything about Taiwan which makes me feel like I’m not very integrated in some aspects.” – Vietnam 6

Interestingly, several students have different viewpoints,

One of the students mentioned understanding and respect as the key to navigate intercultural differences:

"I think Taiwanese people can be quite shy when they first meet someone and may hesitate to talk. However, the next time you see them, they tend to smile and engage in conversation more. I feel that making friends with Taiwanese people takes a little time to get used to and understand them better. <...> I spend most of my time with Taiwanese people. I think it's quite difference between Thais and Taiwanese, whether in culture, mindset, language, or even the taste of food. However, we can get along well because we try to accept each other's individuality and respect our differences with understanding". – Thailand 8

One other student also shared that he felt a strong sense of belonging due to his extroverted nature and proactive approach to making friends. He mentioned that he has lived in Taiwan for over eight years, initially visiting as a tourist.

"I have many Taiwanese friends here, so whenever there's a special occasion, I always travel to meet with them," he added.

This long-term connection with local friends and familiarity with the culture has deepened his sense of belonging. The student said,

"I'm blessed to be surrounded by beautiful, beautiful people here in Taiwan who treat me well and consider me a part of their community and family. And I'm forever grateful for that. There's a lot of my best friends here in Taiwan. I feel loved here, and Taiwan feels like my second home. I've made good friends, both locals and internationals, and that helps me feel like I belong." – The Philippines 4

Another student expressed a similar sense of belonging, emphasizing his prolonged stay in Taiwan. Growing up on the Myanmar-China border, he attended a Chinese school, which inspired him to pursue a better high school education in Taiwan. Now, in his final year of undergraduate study he stated:

“The longer I’m here the more I have the audacity to call Taiwan my second home”. –

Myanmar 9

These personal relationships and years spent in Taiwan have given these students a deep sense of belonging, making Taiwan feel like a second home.

This highlights how linguistic and cultural barriers greatly influence the students' overall experience. The level of interaction they have with local Taiwanese students can greatly influence the sense of belonging of Southeast Asian student in Taiwan. Hence, language barrier is a crucial element in shaping this entire process. Many students felt excluded and found it difficult to make meaningful connections with locals due to their insufficient Mandarin skills. As a result, they frequently sought out fellow international students, particularly those from Southeast Asia, with whom they could relate with and share similar difficulties. Many still struggled to completely integrate into Taiwanese society as integration is a complex and long term process. While some students had a better feeling of belonging because of their outgoing personality, others still felt like outsiders despite having found a place for themselves in Taiwan. In summary, linguistic and cultural challenges continue to play an important role in determining the extent of Southeast Asian students' integration and general sense of belonging in the local community.

Comparison with International Contexts

This section presents the current study's findings in the context of a larger body of worldwide research on foreign student experiences. This section shows both similarities and distinctions in the Wenzao environment by comparing the obstacles experienced by Southeast Asian students in Taiwan to those encountered by international students in other countries. This comparison provides insight on how the findings align with or differ from worldwide trends, providing a better understanding of the factors affecting social integration.

The top destinations for international students are mainly English speaking countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada.⁵² Extensive research from these countries has identified common challenges faced by international students. For instance, a study conducted in the United States found that language proficiency is a major obstacle, affecting students' ability to connect with peers, navigate daily tasks, and actively participate in academic settings.⁵³ Similar findings have been reported outside English-speaking countries; for example, a study in Uzbekistan revealed that language barriers hinder students' academic progress, ability to form meaningful relationships, and campus engagement.⁵⁴ These parallels the feelings of exclusion reported by Southeast Asian students at Wenzao Ursuline University, who struggle to form meaningful connections with local Taiwanese peers due to language and cultural barriers.

In addition to language barriers, international students frequently encounter discrimination and racism, which further impede their adaptation and academic success. A 2013 study in the United Kingdom revealed that 32% of international students surveyed had experienced racially motivated verbal or physical assault.⁵⁵ Another study highlighted cultural bias and prejudice against Chinese students in Canada based on language use, skin color, and cultural practices.⁵⁶ Similarly, non-native English speakers in Australia often experience linguistic racism, including ethnic and linguistic stereotyping, which negatively

⁵² Omotoyosi Oduwaye, Askin Kiraz, and Yasemin Sorakin, "A Trend Analysis of the Challenges of International Students over 21 Years," *Sage Open* 13, no. 4 (2023/10/01 2023), accessed 2024/12/30, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/21582440231210387>.

⁵³ Min-Hua Hsieh, "Challenges for International Students in Higher Education: One Student's Narrated Story of Invisibility and Struggle," *College student journal* 41 (2007).

⁵⁴ Nasiba Rahmatjonova, "Talented, yet Not Clearly Understood Investigating Language Barriers of International Students in Higher Education in Uzbekistan," (2024), <https://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14523309>.

⁵⁵ Lorraine Brown, and Ian Jones, "Encounters with Racism and the International Student Experience," *Studies in Higher education* 38, no. 7 (2013).

⁵⁶ Lin Ge, Douglas Brown, and Douglas Durst, "Chinese International Students' Experiences in a Canadian University: Ethnographic Inquiry with Gender Comparison," *Journal of International Students* 9, no. 2 (2019).

impacts their confidence and integration.⁵⁷ These findings resonate with the experiences of Southeast Asian students in Taiwan, who face stereotypes and exclusion related to their ethnicity and accents.

Language barriers often intensify sociocultural challenges by limiting international students' ability to build connections with domestic peers. Research conducted in the United States shows that students with limited language proficiency often gravitate toward others who share their ethnicity.⁵⁸ This mirrors the tendency of Wenzao students to seek support from fellow Southeast Asians rather than integrating into the broader local community. A sense of belonging—defined as feeling accepted and supported in an educational and social environment—is essential for international students' academic success and psychological well-being.⁵⁹ The lack of a sense of belonging reported by many Southeast Asian students in Taiwan reflects a global trend where cultural and linguistic barriers hinder inclusion.

A study in the United Kingdom identified common issues such as stress, homesickness, loneliness, and social isolation among international students.⁶⁰ These challenges are often rooted in limited social support and cultural differences.⁶¹ Building peer relationships has been shown to be a critical strategy for mitigating these issues, as it provides much-needed emotional and practical support.⁶² For Southeast Asian students in Taiwan, this often involves forming bonds with peers from similar cultural backgrounds due

⁵⁷ Sender Dovchin, "The Psychological Damages of Linguistic Racism and International Students in Australia," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 23, no. 7 (2020).

⁵⁸ Eman Elturki et al., "Needs, Expectations, and Experiences of International Students in Pathway Program in the United States," *Journal of International Students* 9, no. 1 (2019).

⁵⁹ Carol Goodenow, and Kathleen Grady, "The Relationship of School Belonging and Friends' Values to Academic Motivation among Urban Adolescent Students," *The Journal of Experimental Education* 62 (07/14 2010), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1993.9943831>.

⁶⁰ Paul Cowley, and Denis Hyams-Ssekasi, "Motivation, Induction, and Challenge: Examining the Initial Phase of International Students' Educational Sojourn," *Journal of International Students* 8, no. 1 (2018).

⁶¹ W. C. Tseng, and Fred Newton, "International Students' Strategies for Well-Being," *College student journal* 36 (01/01 2002).

⁶² Senel Poyrazli, and Kamini Grahame, "Barriers to Adjustment: Needs of International Students within a Semi-Urban Campus Community," *Resources* 34 (01/01 2007).

to difficulties connecting with local students. Initiatives aimed at fostering peer relationships and building supportive communities could improve integration and overall well-being.

By contextualizing these findings within broader international research, this comparison underscores the common challenges faced by international students worldwide while highlighting Taiwan's unique linguistic and cultural environment. These findings emphasize the importance of developing tailored strategies to support students in integrating and thriving in diverse educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the intercultural communication challenges faced by Southeast Asian students at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Taiwan, within the context of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, which promotes educational and economic collaboration with Southeast Asia. Recognizing the critical importance of these students' experiences, the research focused on their encounters with language barriers, cultural stereotypes, and the process of social integration. By exploring these challenges alongside coping strategies, the study aimed to uncover actionable insights for enhancing institutional support and fostering an inclusive educational environment in Taiwan.

The research centered on three research questions: identifying the barriers faced by Southeast Asian students, understanding the impact of language proficiency on social integration, and examining how interactions with local students influence their sense of belonging. Through a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews with nine participants, the study adopted thematic analysis to identify key patterns, offering a nuanced understanding of the students' lived experiences.

The findings revealed three core themes: first, students faced significant barriers such as insufficient Mandarin proficiency, cultural stereotypes, and feelings of exclusion. These challenges, exacerbated by societal biases, negatively impacted their academic and social experiences. Second, language proficiency emerged as a critical factor in fostering meaningful interpersonal relationships, with limited proficiency often hindering engagement with local peers. Despite these obstacles, students demonstrated resilience by employing strategies like self-study, peer support, and translation tools, which aided in adaptation and boosted their confidence. Finally, the research highlighted the strong link between the level of interaction with local students and a sense of belonging. Students with frequent and

meaningful exchanges reported greater integration, while limited interactions contributed to isolation and detachment.

When comparing these findings to global trends in international student adaptation, similarities and distinctions emerge. Like many international students in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, Southeast Asian students at Wenzao experience common challenges such as social isolation, homesickness, and loneliness. These feelings of exclusion, primarily driven by cultural differences and limited social support, parallel the struggles reported by international students worldwide. The difficulty in forming meaningful connections with local peers is a recurring theme, with social isolation often exacerbated by language barriers. At Wenzao, the lack of Mandarin proficiency among Southeast Asian students creates a significant barrier to communication and integration, similar to the struggles that non-native speakers face in English-speaking countries.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on international student adaptation by shedding light on the experiences of a relatively understudied demographic—Southeast Asian students in Taiwan. The findings emphasize the importance of language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and institutional support in facilitating their integration. While Taiwan's push for English-Medium Instruction (EMI) is a promising step toward internationalization, this research reveals that current efforts fall short in addressing the broader social and cultural integration needs of these students. Enhancing support systems, promoting intercultural understanding, and ensuring equitable treatment are vital for creating a more inclusive and supportive environment. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impacts of these integration efforts, as well as comparative analyses with international students from other regions.

Suggestion for the Research

This study's limited sample size, comprising only nine students from a single university, highlights the challenge of generalizing Wenzao's findings to the broader Southeast Asian student population. To address this limitation, future research could involve a larger and more diverse sample of Southeast Asian students from multiple universities across Taiwan. Incorporating comparative analyses with other universities could further validate these findings. Such an approach would offer a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by this demographic, paving the way for the development of effective support systems within Taiwan's higher education sector. Ultimately, this would promote greater inclusion and integration for Southeast Asian students.

APPENDIX A

[INTERVIEW QUESTIONS]

1. Background Information

- Can you share a bit about where you grew up, and what led you to pursue higher education in Taiwan?

2. Initial Decision to Study in Taiwan

- What influenced your decision to study in Taiwan and choose Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages?
- Before coming to Taiwan, did you have experiences with people from other cultures? How did they shape your expectations? (e.g. international travel, studying in a multicultural school, participating in events/ programs, living in a multicultural neighborhood, etc)

3. Early Cultural Adjustments

- What were your first impressions upon arriving in Taiwan?
- Were there any cultural shocks or challenges you faced initially?

4. Language Barriers and Communication

- How have language barriers impacted your daily life and academic experience in Taiwan?

5. Coping with Language Barriers

- What strategies or tools have helped you manage language differences?
- Have you found any resources, like language classes or apps, particularly helpful?

6. Intercultural Interactions and Social Integration

- How often do you interact with local Taiwanese students or people outside the university?
- How do these interactions compare to those with other international students or people from your home country?

7. Cultural Misunderstandings

- Have you experienced any moments of cultural misunderstanding or confusion? If so, how did you resolve them?

8. Building Friendships and Social Networks

- What has been your experience in forming social connections with local Taiwanese students?
- Have there been any challenges in building these relationships, and if so, what are they?

9. Sense of Belonging in Taiwan

- How would you describe your sense of belonging in Taiwan?
- What factors make you feel more or less included in the local community? -

10. Dealing with Stereotypes and Bias (Broad Focus)

- Have you noticed any stereotypes or assumptions about Southeast Asian students?
- How have you responded when faced with these situations?

11. More Specific Instances of Unfairness (As Needed)

- Have you ever experienced moments where you felt treated unfairly due to your background? Could you describe a specific experience if you're comfortable?

12. Coping Strategies for Stereotypes or Unfair treatment

- How do you typically handle challenges related to stereotypes or unfair treatment?
- What resources, people, or activities help you navigate these situations?

13. Support Systems

- How well do you think Wenzao supports international students? What types of support have been most helpful?
- Is there anything you feel is missing from the support provided?

APPENDIX B

[CONSENT FORM FOR THE INTERVIEWEES]

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Towards Social Integration: A Study of Intercultural Communication Barriers among Southeast Asian Students at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages

Primary Investigator: Brianne Winfried

Institution: Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages

This study seeks to understand the experiences of Southeast Asian students studying in Taiwan. The study focuses on cultural adaptation, language barriers, social integration, and any instances of prejudice, stereotypes, or discrimination that you may have encountered. Your insights will help shed light on these issues and contribute to efforts to improve intercultural communication and support for international students in Taiwan. The duration for the discussion of the questions is estimated to range between 30 to 60 minutes. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions before providing your consent.

I have been provided with a detailed explanation of the purpose and nature of this study. I understand that this research aims to contribute to knowledge in the field of education and has received approval from the Department of International Affairs at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages. Yes No

I acknowledge that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I am under no obligation to take part in it. Yes No

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any stage for any reason, without the need to provide an explanation. Yes No

I understand that all information I provide will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. My responses will be kept anonymous and confidential to the researchers. Only in cases where statutory obligations of the agencies working with the researchers necessitate, confidentiality may be breached for the safety of the participant or others. Yes No

I agree that the bodily samples (audio recordings) taken during this study can be stored for future research. Yes No

If “No” to the above, I confirm that the bodily samples taken during this study can only be used for this study and should be disposed of upon completion of the research [16th November 2024]. Yes No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation and all my queries have been addressed to my satisfaction. Yes No

I have read and understood this consent form. Yes No

Name _____ Signature _____

Date _____

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