

# Language Barriers and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Australian Higher Education: Addressing Challenges for Chinese International Students

Xinhao Yang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>, Ruixiang Ren<sup>2,b</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Hunan University, Changsha, China

<sup>a</sup>suki990410@gmail.com, <sup>b</sup>958396394@qq.com

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** With the rapid acceleration of globalization, Chinese students form a significant proportion of international students in Australian higher education. Despite their academic success, these students face substantial challenges related to language barriers and cultural differences, which adversely impact their academic performance, social integration, and mental well-being. This paper explores the psychological and sociological impacts of language barriers on Chinese international students, emphasizing how language anxiety contributes to social isolation and emotional distress. The paper draws on Berry's cultural adaptation model, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory to discuss these challenges in depth. It further applies the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) framework to propose solutions that enhance students' self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills, thereby improving their academic and emotional outcomes. The research concludes with policy recommendations for Australian higher education institutions, educators, and parents, aiming to create a supportive environment that helps Chinese international students overcome language barriers and thrive both academically and socially.

**Keywords:** Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Language Barriers, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid acceleration of globalization, more and more Chinese students are choosing to study abroad, and Australia has become one of their primary destinations. According to statistics from the Australian Department of Education, China is the largest source country of international students in Australia, particularly in higher education<sup>[1]</sup>. Although these students typically perform well academically, language barriers and cultural differences remain significant challenges they face in their new learning and living environments.

### 1.1. The Impact of Globalization on International Education

Globalization has not only driven the internationalization of education but has also increased cultural diversity within higher education systems. According to data from the International Association of Education, global cross-border student mobility has increased by 30% over the past decade, primarily due to the accelerated pace of globalization<sup>[2]</sup>. As higher education institutions face increasing numbers of international students, they must provide not only high-quality academic resources but also establish comprehensive support systems to help students adapt linguistically and culturally.

For international students from non-English-speaking countries, particularly Chinese students, language barriers not only limit their academic performance in the classroom but also negatively impact their social lives and emotional health (Mi & Zhang, 2009). For example, although many Chinese international students excel in written exams and assignments, challenges in speaking and listening significantly hinder their classroom participation and social interactions with peers. These issues, in turn, affect their mental health, leading to long-term anxiety and feelings of isolation<sup>[17]</sup>.

## ***1.2. Psychological and Sociological Effects of Language Barriers***

Psychological research shows that language barriers can lead to feelings of inferiority, loneliness, and anxiety<sup>[3]</sup>. For instance, a study on language anxiety among international students found that language barriers can result in social isolation, which in turn affects students' mental health, sometimes even leading to symptoms of depression<sup>[5]</sup>. Language barriers are not just academic issues but also deep-rooted psychological ones. Analyzing psychological literature reveals that language anxiety is closely linked to self-efficacy. Students with insufficient language skills often feel inadequate, believing they cannot communicate at the level of native speakers, and this negative feeling creates a double barrier, both academic and social. According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory, students' self-efficacy is closely related to their academic performance and emotional state (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, language barriers not only hinder Chinese students' classroom performance but also impact their emotional well-being.

Sociological research also points out that language barriers not only affect individuals' communication skills but also intensify cultural shock, making it difficult for international students to adapt to a new culture, leading to confusion and frustration<sup>[8]</sup>. Chinese students typically come from a collectivist culture, which sharply contrasts with Australia's individualistic culture. This cultural difference further deepens the students' sense of isolation and makes cultural adaptation more challenging<sup>[8]</sup>. In a collectivist culture, relationships between people are usually close-knit, and students rely on the support of family and peers. However, in individualistic cultures, students are expected to focus more on personal independence and self-expression. This cultural difference makes it difficult for Chinese students to adapt to the social interaction styles and classroom participation expectations of local students. For example, Chinese students often participate less in classroom discussions, fearing that their language skills are inferior to those of native speakers. Meanwhile, in Australian classrooms, discussions and interactions are crucial components of the teaching process.

In this context, implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) policies is particularly important. SEL focuses not only on students' academic performance but also on their emotional health and social adaptability<sup>[16]</sup>. The SEL framework can help students develop self-awareness, social awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, thus enabling them to better cope with challenges posed by language and cultural barriers. For instance, by fostering social awareness, students can understand and accept classmates from different cultural backgrounds, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts in cross-cultural communication. This paper will explore how language barriers impact the academic and social lives of Chinese international students and analyze how the SEL framework can help these students overcome challenges, achieving success in both academic and social aspects of life.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### ***2.1. Research Design***

This research adopts a qualitative approach, combining literature review and case study methods. The literature review focuses on theories of cultural adaptation, language anxiety, and social-emotional learning, while the case studies examine real-life experiences of Chinese international students in Australian higher education settings. Data were collected from a review of existing studies, scholarly articles, and reports on the challenges faced by international students.

### ***2.2. Data Collection***

Secondary data was collected from academic journals, government publications, and reports from Australian universities. Additionally, case studies were analyzed based on student experiences and institutional responses to language barriers and cultural adaptation challenges. Online interviews with several Chinese students studying in Australia provided insights into the personal challenges they faced.

### ***2.3. Data Analysis***

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes such as language anxiety, cultural adaptation, mental health, and academic performance were identified. The application of the SEL framework was evaluated to assess its effectiveness in addressing these challenges, and recommendations were formulated based on the findings.

### **3. Rationale**

#### ***3.1. Cultural Adaptation and Language Barriers***

A major challenge faced by Chinese international students in Australian higher education is language barriers. According to Berry's cultural adaptation model (2005), international students typically go through four stages when adapting to a new cultural environment: cultural shock, adaptation, adjustment, and assimilation. For Chinese students whose first language is not English, language barriers often prolong their stay in the cultural shock stage, hindering their smooth adaptation to the new environment. Cultural adaptation is not only an academic challenge but also involves emotional and social adjustment. Berry points out that language barriers are closely linked to cultural shock; language is the main tool for students to adapt to a new culture, and language barriers hinder their ability to integrate into the new cultural context.

Recent studies have increasingly shown that there is a complex interaction between language barriers and cultural adaptation. For example, research indicates that students with stronger language skills adapt to new cultures more quickly (Ward et al., 2001). Therefore, language learning is not just a means to improve academic ability but also a vital tool to help students integrate into new cultures. Particularly in a highly internationalized country like Australia, international students' language proficiency largely determines their academic success and level of social adaptation. Therefore, when designing language courses, universities should provide more personalized support that takes into account students' cultural backgrounds and language needs.

#### ***3.2. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory***

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) emphasizes the critical role of language in learning and cognitive development. For Chinese international students, language is not only a tool for acquiring knowledge but also a key means of socializing and building relationships.<sup>[19]</sup> Vygotsky noted that language is the core medium through which individuals understand and construct knowledge in social interactions. Language barriers make it difficult for Chinese students to effectively participate in class discussions and extracurricular activities, exacerbating their feelings of isolation and inferiority (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This isolation not only affects their academic performance but also their mental health. Vygotsky's theory also points out that language barriers affect students' "zone of proximal development" (ZPD)—the learning opportunities students gain through interaction with more experienced peers or teachers. Language barriers prevent Chinese students from fully utilizing these interactive opportunities, thereby hindering their academic and cognitive development.

#### ***3.3. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Educational Differences***

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (2001) suggests that students from different cultural backgrounds may hold different values and behavioral patterns when facing educational systems. Another challenge faced by Chinese students in the Australian education system is the difference between Eastern and Western educational cultures. The Australian educational model emphasizes student autonomy, critical thinking, and collaborative learning, while traditional Chinese education leans more towards knowledge transmission, teacher authority, and classroom discipline. These cultural differences exacerbate Chinese students' discomfort in class. For example, many Chinese students are accustomed to obtaining "correct answers" from teachers, whereas in Australian classrooms, students are expected to solve problems through discussion and critical thinking. This misalignment of expectations may lead to a lack of participation among Chinese students, further affecting their academic performance. Studies show that these cultural differences affect not only students' learning styles but also their thinking patterns. For example, Chinese students tend to be more conservative when answering questions, fearing mistakes, whereas Australian students are more open to presenting different viewpoints and hypotheses<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### ***3.4. Psychological Health and Social Isolation***

Language barriers not only affect students' academic performance but also have far-reaching effects on their mental health. Many Chinese international students feel they cannot integrate into local students' social circles due to language barriers, which in turn leads to social isolation and emotional loneliness<sup>[5]</sup>. This social isolation exacerbates students' cultural shock and further impacts their mental health, leading to anxiety and depression. Psychologists Smith and Khawaja (2011) found a significant association

between language barriers and mental health issues, particularly among students with weaker language skills, where this problem is most pronounced. Social isolation not only affects students' emotional well-being but also diminishes their academic motivation and participation. Studies show that students lacking social support are more likely to experience loneliness and stress, which directly affects their academic performance and mental health<sup>[9]</sup>.

#### **4. Objectives**

In order to address the language and cultural challenges faced by Chinese international students in Australian higher education, comprehensive support measures must be formulated with the collaboration of schools, teachers, students, and their families. The following are specific objectives at different levels.

##### ***4.1. Institutional-Level Objectives***

###### ***4.1.1. Personalized Language Course Design***

Australian higher education institutions should provide comprehensive support to help Chinese students overcome language barriers and integrate into the new cultural environment. Specific measures include offering multi-level language courses to help students improve their academic English skills, particularly listening and speaking. These courses should offer personalized support based on the students' language proficiency, ensuring that each student can improve step by step<sup>[13]</sup>. Additionally, schools should provide more learning resources, such as online learning platforms and language tutoring, to help students improve their language skills outside the classroom. With the development of language learning technologies, many universities have begun incorporating online learning platforms and mobile apps such as Grammarly and Duolingo to assist students in improving their English skills in their own time<sup>[7]</sup>.

###### ***4.1.2. Implementation of Cross-Cultural Adaptation Programs***

To help Chinese students better adapt to Australian culture, schools should establish specialized cross-cultural adaptation programs. These programs should include cultural exchange activities, lectures, and workshops to help students better understand and adapt to Australian culture. For instance, schools could organize "Cultural Days" where students can showcase their cultural traditions and interact with other international and local students<sup>[18]</sup>. These cultural exchanges help promote cross-cultural understanding and reduce cultural conflicts and misunderstandings. Furthermore, schools should offer relevant cultural adaptation guidance to help students understand Australian social norms and cultural customs. For example, schools could provide lectures on Australian social etiquette and cultural differences to help students better adapt to local life.

##### ***4.2. Teacher-Level Objectives***

###### ***4.2.1. Simplified Classroom Language***

Teachers play a crucial role in helping Chinese students overcome language barriers. Teachers can simplify classroom language, using clearer and more straightforward expressions to ensure that students can understand complex academic concepts<sup>[12]</sup>. For example, when teaching complex scientific or social theories, teachers can use concise language and simplified terms to help students better understand. Additionally, teachers should provide more classroom materials, such as handouts and slides, so students can review and understand the content after class.

###### ***4.2.2. Use of Visual Aids***

Teachers can use visual aids (such as charts, videos, etc.) to help students better understand course content. This is especially helpful for students with weaker language skills<sup>[6]</sup>. Research shows that visual aids significantly improve students' understanding of complex concepts and increase classroom engagement. Teachers can also use multimedia tools such as short films or animations to visually explain complex abstract concepts, thereby reducing the impact of language barriers.

###### ***4.2.3. Promoting Cooperative Group Learning***

Teachers should encourage cooperative group learning, which helps Chinese students improve their language skills and social confidence through interaction with peers (Arthur, 2016). Group learning not only improves students' language skills but also promotes cross-cultural communication among students.

For example, teachers can divide students into multicultural groups to complete project tasks together. This cooperative learning model helps reduce students' feelings of social isolation and enhances their sense of belonging and self-confidence.

### **4.3. Student and Parent-Level Objectives**

#### **4.3.1. Enriching Extracurricular and Social Opportunities**

For students, actively participating in academic and social activities at school is an important way to improve language skills and social confidence. Schools should provide a variety of extracurricular activities and social opportunities to help Chinese students build social networks and provide them with practical opportunities to practice language. For example, schools can set up language exchange programs where local students and international students practice language with each other<sup>[15]</sup>. In addition, schools can organize academic seminars, social clubs, and other activities to provide more social opportunities, helping students establish connections with local students.

#### **4.3.2. Emotional and Academic Support for Parents**

Meanwhile, parents play an important role in supporting students' academic and emotional development. Schools should implement parent involvement programs to help parents understand the challenges their children face in Australia and provide emotional support<sup>[10]</sup>. For instance, schools can conduct regular online parent meetings to maintain communication with parents, allowing them to track their children's academic progress and emotional well-being. Moreover, schools should provide resources and guidance on cross-cultural adaptation, helping parents better support their children's studies and lives in a foreign country.

## **5. Applying the CASEL Framework**

The five core competencies of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—provide students with comprehensive emotional and social support<sup>[11]</sup>. Cultivating these core competencies not only enhances students' academic performance but also improves their emotional well-being and cross-cultural adaptation. For Chinese students facing language barriers, fostering social awareness and relationship skills is especially important.

### **5.1. Fostering Social Awareness**

By cultivating social awareness, students can understand others' emotions and cultural backgrounds, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts in cross-cultural interactions<sup>[4]</sup>. For instance, many Chinese students feel confused and uncomfortable when they first arrive in Australia due to unfamiliarity with the country's social norms. Through the cultivation of social awareness, students can better understand local students' behavior, thereby reducing misunderstandings caused by cultural differences. Schools can organize cross-cultural exchange activities to help students enhance their social awareness and practice these skills in real interactions.

### **5.2. Fostering Relationship Skills**

Developing relationship skills can help students build and maintain healthy social relationships, boosting their confidence and social skills (Allen et al., 2017). For Chinese students with weaker language skills, establishing positive social relationships can alleviate feelings of loneliness and improve their mental health. For example, schools can implement mentorship programs that pair new students with senior students to help them better adapt to campus life. These relationships provide not only academic support but also emotional reassurance, giving students a sense of belonging and security.

Schools should provide opportunities for Chinese students to practice these skills through social activities and group projects, helping them better integrate into the academic and social environment in Australia. By practicing the core competencies of SEL, students can improve both their academic performance and emotional well-being, while building positive cross-cultural relationships.

## **6. Action Plan**

To help Chinese international students overcome language barriers and improve their social adaptability, schools should develop comprehensive action plans covering language support services, cross-cultural adaptation services, teaching strategies, and mental health support.

### **6.1. Language Support Services**

#### **6.1.1. Establishing Basic English Courses**

Providing multi-level language support services is a core strategy for helping Chinese international students overcome language barriers. Schools should offer tailored language courses for students of different English proficiency levels, including basic English courses, academic English courses, and conversational English courses<sup>[17]</sup>. For instance, basic English courses should focus on improving students' listening and speaking skills to help them gain more confidence in everyday communication. Academic English courses should focus on enhancing students' language skills in academic settings, such as writing academic papers, delivering classroom presentations, and participating in discussions.

#### **6.1.2. Setting Up Conversation Groups**

Additionally, schools can organize conversation groups and language exchange programs to help students improve their fluency and listening comprehension in informal settings<sup>[14]</sup>. Conversation groups can involve both local and international students, providing a relaxed environment for language practice and enhancing cross-cultural understanding through interaction.

### **6.2. Cross-Cultural Adaptation Services**

#### **6.2.1. Organizing Cultural Exchange Activities**

Schools should provide specialized cross-cultural adaptation support for Chinese international students to help them better integrate into Australia's multicultural environment. For example, schools could regularly host cultural exchange days and international student festivals, giving students the opportunity to showcase their cultural backgrounds and learn about other countries' cultures through interaction with local students. These activities foster cross-cultural understanding and enhance students' cultural identity and confidence<sup>[18]</sup>.

#### **6.2.2. Providing Cross-Cultural Training**

Cross-cultural training is also an essential part of cross-cultural adaptation services. Schools should offer systematic cross-cultural training courses to help international students understand Australian social norms, cultural values, and differences in the education system<sup>[8]</sup>. These training courses can help students adapt to their new environment more quickly, reducing the negative effects of cultural shock. By improving their cultural sensitivity, students can better engage with local peers and reduce misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

### **6.3. Teaching Strategies**

Teachers should adopt adaptive teaching strategies to help Chinese students overcome language barriers. The following are specific teaching strategies:

#### **6.3.1. Using Simplified Language**

Teachers should adjust their teaching language according to students' language proficiency, ensuring that students can understand the course content and participate in classroom discussions. For instance, teachers can use simplified language to explain complex academic concepts, avoiding the use of difficult-to-understand technical terms<sup>[12]</sup>. Additionally, teachers should provide detailed classroom notes and slides to help students review and understand the course content after class.

#### **6.3.2. Using Visual Aids**

Visual aids are an effective tool for helping students understand complex abstract concepts, particularly for students with weaker language skills. Teachers should extensively use charts, videos, and other visual aids to help students grasp complex concepts and improve classroom engagement<sup>[6]</sup>. For example, when teaching subjects such as economics or sociology, teachers can use charts to display data trends, helping students understand concepts visually.

### **6.3.3. Implementing Cooperative Learning**

Through group cooperative learning, teachers can facilitate interactions between Chinese international students and their peers, helping them improve language skills and reduce feelings of social isolation (Arthur, 2016). For example, teachers can design team-based projects that require students to work collaboratively in groups. This cooperative learning not only enhances students' language skills but also helps them develop social skills through cross-cultural interaction.

### **6.4. Mental Health Support**

Language barriers and cultural shock have far-reaching effects on Chinese international students' mental health, so schools should provide comprehensive mental health support to help students cope with emotional distress and academic pressure.

#### **6.4.1. Providing Psychological Counseling Services**

Schools should establish specialized counseling centers offering one-on-one counseling, group discussions, and mental health seminars to help students alleviate anxiety, loneliness, and other negative emotions (Bennouna et al., 2021). Counseling services should address the specific needs of international students, particularly emotional distress caused by language barriers and cultural adaptation.

#### **6.4.2. Establishing Emotional Support Networks**

Schools should also establish emotional support networks, encouraging students to gain emotional support through participation in student clubs, mentorship programs, and other social activities. Research shows that strong social support networks significantly improve international students' mental health, helping them better cope with academic pressure and emotional distress<sup>[17]</sup>. For example, schools can set up "student support groups" where students can share their concerns in a relaxed environment and offer mutual support and encouragement.

## **7. Policy Statements**

To ensure that Chinese international students receive adequate support in language and cultural adaptation, schools should implement comprehensive Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) policies. These policies should include the following components.

### **7.1. Language Support Service Policy**

Schools should provide personalized language support services for Chinese international students. Language support should include basic English courses, academic English courses, and conversational English courses to help students gradually improve their language proficiency. The goal of these courses is to ensure that students can effectively participate in classroom discussions and confidently express themselves in social settings<sup>[17]</sup>. Additionally, schools should offer language tutoring and online learning resources to help students further improve their language skills outside the classroom.

### **7.2. Cross-Cultural Adaptation Policy**

Schools should offer cross-cultural adaptation support for international students, including regular cultural exchange activities and cross-cultural training courses. Through these activities, schools can help students better understand Australian cultural norms and social values, thereby reducing the negative effects of cultural shock<sup>[18]</sup>. For instance, schools can provide new students with cultural adaptation handbooks and organize regular cultural lectures to help them understand Australian culture and social etiquette.

### **7.3. Teaching Support Policy**

Teachers should receive specialized training to help them effectively support students with weaker language skills. Schools should establish policies that encourage teachers to use simplified language, visual aids, and cooperative learning strategies in the classroom to ensure that all students can keep up with the course content<sup>[6]</sup>. Moreover, schools should provide teachers with relevant cross-cultural training to help them understand and address the cultural diversity in the classroom.

#### **7.4. Mental Health and Emotional Support Policy**

Language barriers and cultural adaptation difficulties often have a negative impact on students' mental health, so schools should provide comprehensive mental health support services. Schools should establish counseling centers, regularly conduct mental health seminars, and provide emotional support networks to help students cope with emotional distress and academic pressure (Bennouna et al., 2021). Additionally, schools should offer mental health workshops to help students learn how to manage emotions and cope with stress.

#### **7.5. Parent-School Collaboration Policy**

Parents play an important role in supporting international students' academic and emotional development. Schools should maintain regular communication with parents through online parent workshops to help them understand their children's learning and living conditions in a foreign country and provide appropriate support<sup>[10]</sup>. For instance, schools can offer online resources and guides to help parents understand the cultural and academic challenges their children face in Australia and offer them effective strategies for support.

### **8. Conclusion**

Implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) policies can effectively help Chinese international students overcome language barriers and enhance their academic performance and cross-cultural adaptation. By fostering social awareness and relationship skills, students can better integrate into Australian academic and social environments, improve their emotional well-being, and achieve overall happiness. Furthermore, the joint efforts of schools, teachers, and parents are crucial for ensuring the successful implementation of SEL policies.

Future research should further explore the effectiveness of SEL policies in different cultural contexts, particularly for other non-English-speaking international students. Additionally, schools should continuously optimize and adjust SEL policies based on student feedback and data evaluation to ensure their effectiveness.

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