

Assessing the Correlation Between English Proficiency and Engagement in School and Community

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, students from diverse linguistic backgrounds often face difficulties due to language barriers. This study explored the association between subjective levels of English proficiency and academic and community engagement among high school students. We conducted an online survey at *Canyon Crest Academy* in San Diego, California, collecting responses from 56 participants enrolled in regular English and developmental English classes ($n = 56$). Survey participants assessed their English proficiency and reported their perceived challenges in academic activities and community interactions. The survey questions targeted three key areas: communication with adults, communication with peers, and general engagement in both school and community settings. The Fisher's Exact Test was employed to analyze the correlations between English proficiency and reported challenges in both settings. Results indicated statistically significant correlations in all areas, suggesting that students with limited English proficiency (LEP) perceived greater difficulties in communication and engagement. These findings highlight the potential barriers that LEP students face in educational and social integration, emphasizing the need for targeted support to enhance their experience and success. The study enhances our understanding of the associations between language barriers and student engagement.

Introduction

In the United States, the ability to communicate effectively in English is not just a skill but a necessity for navigating daily life and accessing opportunities. Given the nation's linguistic diversity, where individuals coming from backgrounds of over 7,000 languages are spoken globally (Anderson, 2012), English proficiency is crucial for successfully engaging in both educational and social environments in the U.S. When considering that most individuals in the U.S. speak only one or two languages, the challenge of language barriers becomes evident. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey, 21.5 percent of individuals in the U.S. use a language other than English within their homes. Among these individuals, 8.2 percent have proficiency in English below a 'very well' standard, thus categorized as individuals with limited English proficiency. Individuals who are identified as qualifying for limited English proficiency (LEP) refer to those whose English is not their preferred language and who have limited proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). The challenge of language barriers is pronounced among students from linguistically diverse backgrounds. In educational contexts, these language barriers can hinder students' understanding of the material (Robertson et al., 2000) and their interactions with peers, which are essential for quality education (Alotaibi et al., 2023). Similarly, in community settings, language proficiency affects everyday interactions, such as communicating with service providers (Kim & Mattila, 2011) and having mental healthcare services (Kim et al., 2011).

Literature Review

Language Barrier

Language barriers pose significant challenges for individuals in the U.S., particularly affecting those identified with LEP (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Individuals with LEP frequently encounter difficulties in reading, writing, speaking, or comprehending English, which compromises their ability to communicate and fully engage in educational and community activities effectively. Harzing and Feely (2008) explored how language barriers impact communication within multinational companies, highlighting the challenges of interactions between parent companies and international subsidiaries. These insights into effective business communication are equally relevant to daily life in the U.S., where similar barriers can obstruct understanding and interaction. The situational variability of LEP suggests that an individual's proficiency in English can significantly differ depending on the context, from informal school conversations to more formal situations outside of school. This variation implies that while individuals with LEP might easily navigate some English-speaking settings, they may encounter substantial challenges in others.

Kim and Mattila (2011) illuminated the effects of language barriers in a qualitative study with nine Korean adults in the U.S., from tourists to residents, examining their dining experiences. This investigation revealed significant communication problems with restaurant staff, leading to dissatisfaction with the dining experience. Uncovering 46 themes related to language and cultural misunderstandings, the research highlighted that frustrations in social settings often stem from LEP rather than the quality of service received. Consequently, the presence of language barriers introduces significant obstacles for individuals with LEP across all facets of life in the U.S. The findings from Harzing and Feely (2008) and Kim and Mattila (2011) emphasize the importance of observing how students with LEP navigate their educational and community environments amidst the diverse situations they face.

Struggles from LEP in the School Setting

The school environment poses distinct challenges for students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). Existing literature on students' academic life highlights how academic pressures can influence behaviors and engagement in school activities (Deng et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2022), potentially leading to burnout and affecting high school students' educational trajectories (Fiorilli et al., 2017). In this context, language barriers are a pivotal factor that can intensify these challenges for students with LEP, making it crucial to examine their impact within educational settings. Students with LEP encounter additional hurdles in grasping instructional content and participating in classroom discussions, obstacles that their native English-speaking peers typically do not face. This struggle with academic communication acts as a barrier not only to education but also to full engagement with the school community.

The study by Robertson et al. (2000) illuminates the specific challenges encountered by students with LEP. They surveyed 408 overseas undergraduate students at the International University in Australia, uncovering that social isolation, homesickness, and insufficient faculty guidance were widespread issues. These international students frequently had difficulties understanding lectures and contributing to classroom discussions, which negatively affected their academic performance and participation. The findings of Robertson et al. (2000) underscore the significant impact of language barriers on educational experiences, demonstrating how these barriers can obstruct students' academic achievement and community engagement.

Struggles from LEP in the Community Setting

Similar to educational environments, community settings present challenges for individuals with LEP when they encounter language barriers. Despite the significant impact of these barriers on individuals' interactions within the community context outside of school, there has been limited scholarly attention to this area. However, research within the healthcare industry has illuminated how language barriers can negatively affect the efficiency of service delivery and patient care. In this context, Kim et al. (2011) specifically investigated the language barriers faced by immigrants with psychiatric disorders in accessing mental health services in the U.S. Utilizing data from the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS) involving 372 Latino and Asian immigrant adults diagnosed with mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders, Kim et al. (2011) found that LEP statistically significantly lowered the likelihood of mental health service utilization among Latino immigrants, even after considering variables such as health insurance status, self-rated mental health, and the presence of multiple psychiatric disorders, although this deterrent effect of LEP on service use was not evident among Asian immigrants. Such findings emphasize the critical role language barriers play in limiting access to engaging in vital community services and resources.

Beyond the particular realm of mental health services, individuals with LEP encounter challenges in daily interactions within the community that can exacerbate social isolation and restrict their participation in social life. Everyday activities, such as interacting with clerks, hanging out with peers outside of educational settings, and participating in local community events or volunteer activities, can become challenging tasks for those with LEP. These barriers, impacting more than just healthcare and education, hinder LEP individuals' ability to navigate and contribute to their communities effectively. The challenge of initiating and maintaining conversations in English can result in missed opportunities for social connections and civic engagement, thereby underscoring the need to address language barriers across all community aspects.

Present Study

Understanding the impact of the language barrier is crucial since it may lead to other issues in one's life, such as interpersonal conflict, stress, and social isolation (Lai et al., 2020). This study provides insight into how subjective perceptions of English proficiency influence high school students' participation in educational and community environments. The data was collected from the author's current high school, *Canyon Crest Academy*, located in San Diego, California. Utilizing this data, this study assessed the relationship between students' self-assessed English language proficiency and their engagement in school activities and broader community interactions. In this study, the author assesses how language barriers, based on their level of self-assessed English proficiency, influence high school students' involvement in school and community activities.

The impact of language barriers has been explored across diverse contexts, encompassing dining experiences (Kim & Mattila, 2011), healthcare services (Kim et al., 2011), and educational settings at the university level (Robertson et al., 2000). While these studies illuminate the challenges language barriers introduce, there remains a gap in research that specifically focuses on high school students in the U.S. This demographic is subject to unique pressures, as their academic performance, social interactions, and teacher-student relationships are profoundly affected by language proficiency (Jiang et al., 2022).

This study investigates how subjective perceptions of English proficiency impact high school students' participation in educational and community environments. Utilizing data collected from Canyon Crest Academy in San Diego, California, the research assesses the relationship between students' self-assessed English language proficiency and their engagement in both school activities and broader community interactions. Such insights are crucial as language barriers can lead to interpersonal conflict, stress, and social isolation (Lai et al., 2020).

Research Questions

1. How does limited English proficiency (or language barriers) influence high school students' ability to communicate with teachers and peers and engage in academic activities?

2. How does limited English proficiency (or language barriers) affect high school students' ability to communicate effectively and participate in community activities outside of school?

With over 20 percent of California's population in 2022 comprising individuals born outside the U.S. (Azari et al., 2024), this geographical setting is particularly relevant for investigating language barriers in a linguistically diverse educational and community environment. The goal of the present study is to assess the impact of language barriers on high school students' experiences within their educational settings and broader community interactions. The hypothesis suggests that students with LEP are likely to face communication challenges due to language barriers, which could hinder their participation in academic activities and diminish their community engagement. By examining the English language proficiency challenges encountered by high school students, this study draws upon findings from diverse contexts, as demonstrated by Kim & Mattila (2011) and Robertson et al. (2000). This emphasizes the importance of in-depth research into the effects of language barriers on this specific demographic, aiming to deepen the conversation around navigating challenges regarding language barriers in both educational and community spheres.

Methods

Data

Data for the current study were derived from a convenience sample of high school students, from grades 9 to 12, enrolled at *Canyon Crest Academy* in San Diego, CA, during the spring of 2024. As all students at this school are educated in English across various subjects, the questionnaire was administered in English. Participants were recruited during class periods by the author, and informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the online Qualtrics survey. Only those who agreed on the informed consent statement were allowed to participate in the survey. Since the high school does not have an Institutional Review Board (IRB), the study protocol was reviewed and approved by the school principal and related school board. Additionally, English course instructors reviewed the questionnaire to ensure that the items were relevant and appropriate for students, particularly those enrolled in both regular and developmental English courses. The author posted the anonymous online survey link on Google Classroom, which was used for the classes, with the approval of course instructors. The sample consisted of 56 participants ($n = 56$) who completed the online questionnaire. This questionnaire covered each participant's subjective confidence in speaking, reading, and writing in English, along with scenarios where language barriers might impact their communication with adults and/or peers and engagement in various activities at school and in the community. These scenarios included difficulties in engaging effectively in group projects, school clubs, and community activities outside of school.

The demographic breakdown of the 56 participants shows academic representation across all high school grades, with three (3) students in G9 accounting for 5.36%, 12 students in G10 making up 21.43%, 29 students in G11 representing 51.79%, and 12 students in G12 comprising 21.43%. In terms of gender distribution within the sample, 23 females account for 41.07%, 32 males represent 57.14%, and one (1) individual identifying as non-binary makes up 1.79%. The sample's racial composition is predominantly Asian, with 39 students representing 65%. The other racial groups include 16 Caucasians (or White), accounting for 26.67%, 4 Hispanics (or Latino), comprising 6.67%, and one (1) student identifying with other racial groups, representing 1.67%.

Table 1. Summary statistics for all study variables ($n = 56$).

	<i>n</i>	(%)	SD	Min., Max.
English Proficiency			0.43	0, 1
Limited proficient (0)	13	23.21%		
Proficient (1)	43	76.79%		
<i>School Setting</i>				
Diff. in communicating w/ adults			0.29	0, 1
No (0)	50	90.91%		
Yes (1)	5	9.09%		
Diff. in communicating w/ peers			0.33	0, 1
No (0)	49	87.50%		
Yes (1)	7	12.50%		
Diff. in general engagement			0.30	0, 1
No (0)	48	90.57%		
Yes (1)	5	9.43%		
<i>Community Setting</i>				
Diff. in communicating w/ adults			0.35	0, 1
No (0)	48	85.71%		
Yes (1)	8	14.29%		
Diff. in communicating w/ peers			0.37	0, 1
No (0)	47	83.93%		
Yes (1)	9	16.07%		
Diff. in general engagement			0.37	0, 1
No (0)	47	83.93%		
Yes (1)	9	16.07%		
Academic Grade			0.80	1, 4

G09 (1)	3	5.36%
G10 (2)	12	21.43%
G11 (3)	29	51.79%
G12 (4)	12	21.43%
Gender		0.53 1, 3
Female (0)	23	41.07%
Male (1)	32	57.14%
Non-binary (2)	1	1.79%
Race		0.70 1, 5
African American (1)	0	0.00%
Asian (2)	39	65.00%
Caucasian (3)	16	26.67%
Hispanic (4)	4	6.67%
Others (5)	1	1.67%

Notes: "Diff. in communicating w/ adults" = Difficulty in communicating with adults; "Diff. in communicating w/ peers" = Difficulty in communicating with peers; "Diff. in general engagement." = Difficulty in general engagement; *Academic Grade* follows the American education system, and G is an abbreviation for a grade; Four (4) respondents identified themselves as "Asian and Hispanic" with two racial/ethnic identities, and they are added to each racial/ethnic category, respectively.

Analytical Strategy

The analytical approach of this study was designed to assess how English language proficiency influences student engagement within educational and community settings. Data preparation involved using Microsoft Excel to ensure accurate categorization and enhance data usability for statistical analysis. Fisher's Exact Test, performed using an online calculator, was the primary method for hypothesis testing due to its suitability for small sample sizes and its precision in handling low-frequency counts in contingency tables that are expected to have frequencies less than 5 ($n < 5$). This was particularly necessary given the distribution challenges noted, such as the positive skewness in language barrier experiences reported by English-proficient students, which is clearly depicted in Figure 1. This figure illustrates the lack of reported language barriers among these students, reinforcing the significance of their proficiency.

Responses labeled "Don't Know/Unsure" were excluded from the analysis to maintain clarity and focus on definitive answers, thus enhancing the reliability and interpretative power of the outcomes. Tables, which are summary statistics and the results from Fisher's Exact Test, were generated using Microsoft Excel, while

figures were produced in Qualtrics. These tools facilitated clear data presentation, assisting in visualizing distributions and relationships. The precise p -values obtained were instrumental in establishing the statistical significance of the correlations between English proficiency and language barrier experiences in school and community settings, respectively, with results indicating statistically significant associations ($p < .05$).

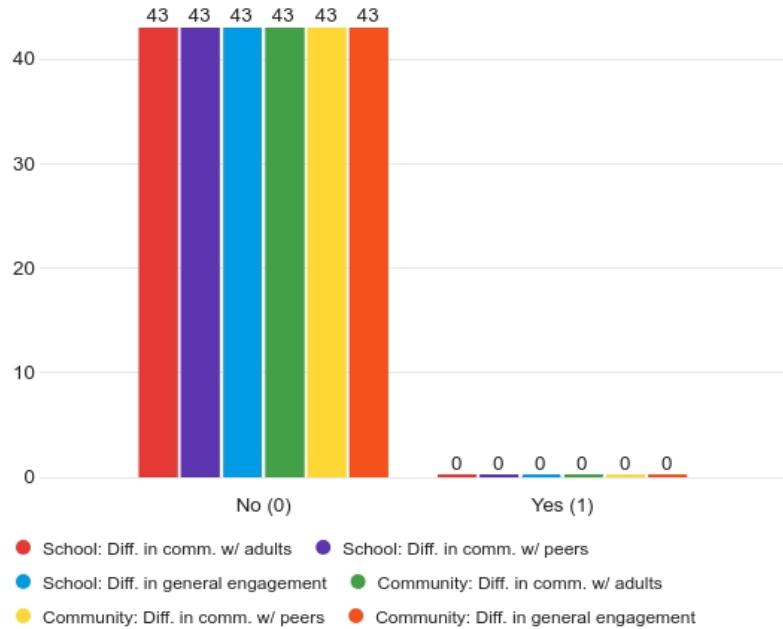


Figure 1. Positive skewness in language barrier experience among English-proficient students ($n = 43$)

Notes: “Diff. in comm. w/ adults” = Difficulty in communicating with adults; “Diff. in comm. w/ peers” = Difficulty in communicating with peers; “Diff. in general engagement” = Difficulty in general engagement.

Measures¹

English Proficiency

English Proficiency was measured based on survey participants' self-reported confidence in their English language skills, specifically focusing on speaking, reading, and writing abilities. Following the guidelines used by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, this variable was operationalized through survey questions that asked students to rate their subjective confidence in these key areas. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023), assessing proficiency requires a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of English language use.

In the current survey, English proficiency questions explicitly asked survey participants, “How confident do you feel in “speaking” in English?” The same question format was used to assess their subjective confidence in reading and writing English. Ordinal-level survey responses were offered on a scale ranging from “not confident at all (1)” to “very confident (5).” A new binary variable was created based on responses to these three (3) questions. For a student to be categorized as “proficient (1)” in this variable, they must have reported being

¹ All items used to construct the measures in the current study can be found in the supplemental materials.

“very confident” in all three (3) domains — speaking, reading, and writing. Any student who did not report “very confident” across all three areas was classified as “non-proficient (0).” This stringent criterion ensures that proficiency reflects a well-rounded command of English, which is essential for full engagement in academic and social contexts. This measurement approach provides a detailed and nuanced understanding of English proficiency among high school students, emphasizing the importance of strong language skills across all communication facets.

Language Barrier Experience

Language barrier experiences were quantitatively assessed through a series of survey questions designed to observe the association between English proficiency and a research participant’s difficulty experience based on their subjective English skills in two distinct settings: school and community.

School Setting: In the school setting, survey participants reported their experiences of difficulties in communication and engagement. The survey included the following questions: “How difficult do you find it to communicate with adults such as teachers and staff?” which addresses *difficulty in communicating with adults*; “Do you find it difficult to communicate with your peers during academic activities?” which focuses on *difficulty in communicating with peers*; and “Are you facing difficulties in general engagement in extracurricular activities like school clubs and sports?” which assesses *difficulty in general engagement*. Survey participants responded to each question on a binary scale (0 = no; 1 = yes), where “yes” indicates that a participant experienced difficulty in the given scenario. Each of these questions is treated as a separate variable, providing insights into distinct aspects of school life where language barriers might be encountered.

Community Setting: Similarly, in the community setting, survey participants answered their communication challenges outside of school through the questions: “How difficult do you find it to communicate with adults like service providers or officials outside of school?” which measures *difficulty in communicating with adults* in the community; “Do you face difficulties in communicating with peers in non-academic settings?” which addresses *difficulty in communicating with peers* in community contexts; and “Are you experiencing difficulties in general engagement in community events or volunteer activities?” which assesses *difficulty in general engagement* in community activities. Each of these areas was also addressed by a specific question requiring a binary response (0 = no; 1 = yes), where “yes” indicates difficulties faced. Like those in the school setting, these questions serve as distinct variables that help identify where students face challenges outside of school.

Results

The study conducted a thorough analysis using the Fisher's Exact Test to examine the correlation between English proficiency and experiences of communication difficulties in both school and community settings among high school students.

School Setting

In the school setting, statistically significant correlations were observed between limited proficiency in English and increased communication difficulties. Notably, seven (7) out of 12 students with limited English proficiency reported difficulties in communicating with adults, such as teachers and staff, compared to none of the 43 English proficient students, yielding a statistically significant result ($p < .001$). This pattern of difficulties extended to communications with peers and participation in general engagement activities such as extracurricular activities at school. Specifically, six (6) out of 13 students with limited English proficiency reported difficulties with

peers, and five (5) out of 13 reported challenges in general engagement; both scenarios also demonstrated statistically significant correlations ($p < .001$). Figure 2 visually represents the extent of communication and engagement difficulties experienced by non-English proficient students in school settings.

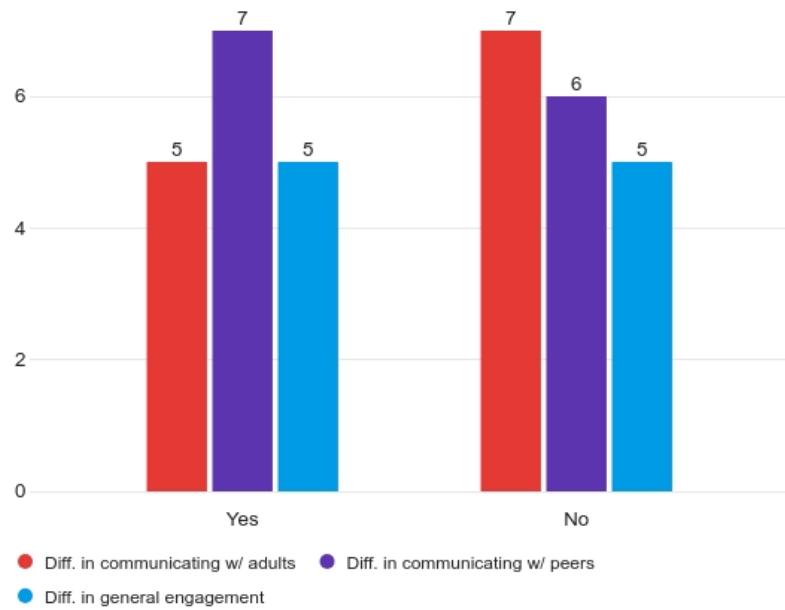


Figure 2. Distribution of language barrier experiences among non-proficient students in school settings.

Notes: "Diff. in communicating w/ adults" = Difficulty in communicating with adults; "Diff. in communicating w/ peers" = Difficulty in communicating with peers; "Diff. in general engagement." = Difficulty in general engagement.

Community Setting

Similarly, in the community setting, students with limited English proficiency reported greater difficulties compared to their English-proficient counterparts. Eight (8) out of 10 students with limited English proficiency experienced difficulties communicating with community adults, and nine (9) out of 13 faced challenges engaging with peers in community activities, with both findings showing statistically significant correlations ($p < .001$). Figure 3 illustrates the difficulties in communication and engagement experienced by students with limited English proficiency in community settings.

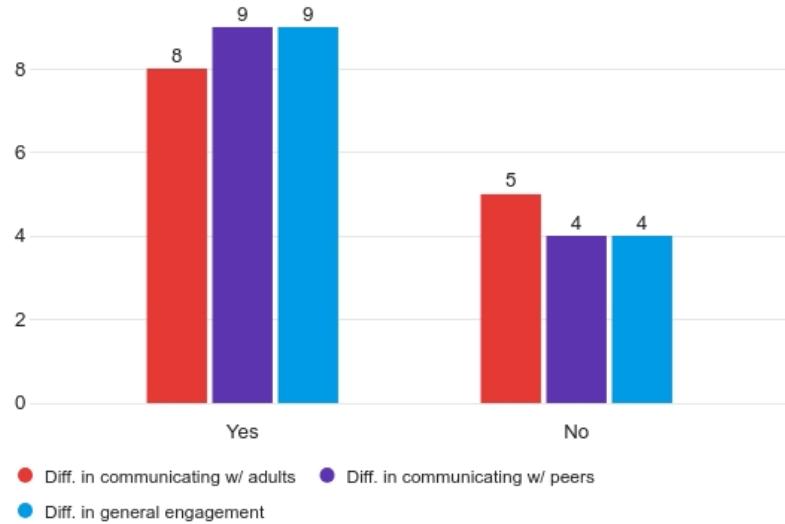


Figure 3. Distribution of language barrier experiences among non-proficient students in community settings.

Notes: "Diff. in communicating w/ adults" = Difficulty in communicating with adults; "Diff. in communicating w/ peers" = Difficulty in communicating with peers; "Diff. in general engagement." = Difficulty in general engagement.

Table 2 details the results of the Fisher's Exact test, presenting the statistical significance of the observed associations between English proficiency and various communication challenges in school and community settings. The use of the Fisher's Exact Test was crucial for determining the strength of the associations between English proficiency and the reported difficulties in both settings. While the test results indicate statistically significant correlations, they do not imply causation between English proficiency and difficulties in communication and engagement. These correlations suggest that students with limited English proficiency face more pronounced challenges in communication and engagement. The findings highlight potential barriers that might impede the educational and social integration of students with limited proficiency in English.

Table 2. The results of the Fisher's Exact Test ($n = 56$).

	No Difficulty (n)	Difficulty (n)	Row Total (n)	Fisher's Ex- act Test <i>p</i> -value	1-sided Fisher's Ex- act Test <i>p</i> -value
<i>School Setting</i>					
Diff. in communicating w/ adults					
Limited proficient	7	5	12	<.001	<.001
Proficient	43	0	43		
Diff. in communicating w/ peers					

Limited proficient	6	7	13	<.001	<.001
Proficient	43	0	43		
Diff. in general engagement					
Limited proficient	5	5	10	<.001	<.001
Proficient	43	0	43		
<i>Community Setting</i>					
Diff. in communicating w/ adults					
Limited proficient	5	8	13	<.001	<.001
Proficient	43	0	43		
Diff. in communicating w/ peers					
Limited proficient	4	9	13	<.001	<.001
Proficient	43	0	43		
Diff. in general engagement					
Limited proficient	4	9	13	<.001	<.001
Proficient	43	0	43		

Notes: "Diff. in communicating w/ adults" = Difficulty in communicating with adults; "Diff. in communicating w/ peers" = Difficulty in communicating with peers; "Diff. in general engagement." = Difficulty in general engagement.

Conclusion

This study identified statistically significant correlations between limited English proficiency and increased communication and engagement challenges in academic and community settings among Canyon Crest Academy high school students. These findings are crucial as they extend the previous research on language barriers, primarily focused on adult populations in various professional and social settings (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Kim & Mattila, 2011), to a high school educational context. The challenges highlighted in this research reflect similar patterns of findings noted in previous studies, such as those by Kim and Mattila (2011), who documented the profound impact of language barriers on social interactions within the community. Similarly, Harzing and Feely (2008) discussed the complications these barriers introduce in multinational corporate communications, illustrating the pervasive nature of these challenges across different life domains.

Future research should consider larger and more diverse samples to verify these findings across different educational and community environments and explore longitudinal impacts to better understand how English proficiency influences student experiences over time. This could also involve more advanced statistical methods to establish causality, further enriching the discourse on educational equity and inclusion for students.

with limited English proficiency. In essence, this research highlights the significant impact that limited English proficiency has on the academic and community engagement of high school students. By identifying the specific challenges faced by these students, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the barriers that can hinder their educational and social participation. As such, it adds an important dimension to the ongoing dialogue about educational strategies and inclusivity, providing a foundation for future studies aimed at enhancing support for students navigating language barriers.

Limitations & Future Research Directions

This study provides important insights into the experiences of high school students with limited English proficiency (LEP) regarding language barriers in academic and community settings. However, limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the small sample size ($n = 56$) restricts the generalizability of the findings and may limit the statistical power of the analysis. Additionally, the study utilized a convenience sample from a single high school in San Diego, California. This sampling method may not capture the diverse experiences of students in different educational settings or geographical regions, such as urban versus rural areas, or from different states across the U.S. The specific geographical and demographic context of the school, located in a state where over 20 percent of the population comprises individuals born outside the U.S. (Azari et al., 2024), makes this setting particularly unique. Consequently, the findings might not be applicable to areas with less linguistic diversity or different demographic compositions. These factors limit the study's national representativeness and its applicability to broader U.S. populations.

To enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings, future studies should aim to expand the research model in several ways. Firstly, increasing the sample size would not only boost the statistical power but also enhance the reliability and depth of the analyses. Utilizing nationally representative data (e.g., the American Community Survey; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023) would allow the results to be generalized across a broader spectrum of the student population, offering insights into varied linguistic and cultural contexts. Longitudinal assessments would be invaluable for tracking the progression and long-term impact of English proficiency on academic and social integration. Moreover, the adoption of more sophisticated statistical techniques to establish causality, such as regression analysis, would provide a clearer understanding of the mechanisms by which English proficiency influences student engagement. By implementing these methodologies, future research could offer more definitive conclusions and stronger empirical support to assess the relationship between one's English proficiency and various difficulties experienced in communication and engagement in and out of school.

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