

The Influence of Language Barriers on Classroom Engagement among Spanish-Speaking Migrant Students at Grove Primary School

Tyrone Dukharan^{1,2,3*}

¹Department of Foundation and Education Management, University of Guyana, Georgetown, Guyana.

²Department of Special Education, Cyril Potter College of Education, Georgetown, Guyana.

³Ministry of Education, Georgetown, Guyana.

***Corresponding Author:** Tyrone Dukharan, Department of Foundation and Education Management, University of Guyana, Georgetown, Guyana. ORCID iD: 0009-0006-2087-1788.

Received: 19 June 2026; **Accepted:** 21 August 2026; **Published:** 30 August 2026

Citation: Tyrone Dukharan. The Influence of Language Barriers on Classroom Engagement among Spanish-Speaking Migrant Students at Grove Primary School. *J. Integr. Neuropsychiatry Behav.* 2026;1(1):1-6. DOI:

Abstract

This study investigated the influence of language barriers on classroom engagement among Spanish-speaking migrant students at Grove Primary School. The study examined how limited English proficiency affected students' participation, interaction with teachers and peers, and overall classroom involvement. Data were collected from teachers and Spanish-speaking migrant students using semi-structured interviews, student questionnaires and classroom observations. The findings revealed that language barriers affected students' understanding of instructions, confidence, class discussion, peer interaction, and participation. Teachers identified visual aids, simplified language, translation, peer support, and repeated instructions as useful strategies. The study recommends greater language support to improve migrant students' classroom engagement.

Keywords

Language Barriers, Classroom Engagement, Spanish-Speaking Migrant Students, Limited English Proficiency, Migrant Education, Primary Education.

Introduction

Research Background

Language is central to the process of teaching, learning and communicating in the primary school setting. For many students who are required to learn in a language that is different to their home language, this will affect their understanding of the instructional input and their ability to engage fully with all classroom-based activities [1]. Global migration has led to an increase in the linguistic diversity within primary schools. As such, it is common for many students to be instructed in a language that is different to their first language. It is documented by research that learning through a second language impacts on students' ability to comprehend, communicate and participate in classroom-based activities [2]. The OECD [3] also reports that language proficiency is closely related to both students' engagement and academic outcomes throughout the early years.

There has been an increase in migrants entering the Caribbean, predominantly from Spanish-speaking countries into English-

speaking territories. UNESCO [4] found that migrant students in the Caribbean encounter issues with participation due to classes being taught in English alone. Okoli and Nweke [5] further reported that the language barrier issues in migrant students affected both the level of social interactions within the classroom and levels of socialisation for these students within the primary school settings of the Caribbean.

Guyana has also seen a considerable increase in Spanish-speaking migrants, particularly from Venezuela. According to local newspapers, many educational systems have begun to enrol a growing number of Spanish-speaking students, causing language-related challenges for schools and teachers [6,7].

Statement of the Problem

Spanish-speaking migrant students at Grove Primary School will be expected to participate in an English-language instructional classroom. The limitations on the English language proficiency of these students may limit their ability to comprehend lessons, respond to the teacher, and participate in class-based activities, which can impact student learning and social interactions.

According to Amina et al. [8], teachers may find it difficult to assess the extent of student understanding and provide adequate support to migrant students because of communication difficulties. There has been an increase in the number of Spanish-speaking migrant students within Guyana's education system, and a need for studies that examine the influence of language barriers on primary-level students' participation within the classroom; hence, this study aimed to fill this gap.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the influence of language barriers on the classroom engagement of Spanish-speaking migrant students at Grove Primary School.

Research Questions

1. How do language barriers affect the participation of Spanish-speaking migrant students during daily classroom instruction?
2. How do language barriers influence interaction between Spanish-speaking migrant students, teachers and peers?

Literature Review

Hidayat et al. [9] noted that during classroom sessions, teacher-student and student-student interaction among peers is essential to facilitate learning. Nonetheless, in the case of Spanish-speaking migrant students who are taught in English, insufficient language proficiency might pose a barrier to their potential to ask questions, provide answers to instructions, discuss, and collaborate with other students. This is consistent with the findings of Egert et al. [1], who reported that students taught through a second language may experience difficulties with understanding and classroom engagement.

Language Barriers and Classroom Engagement

A language barrier in an educational setting occurs when students cannot effectively communicate through the instructional language. Al-Mutairi [10] stated that a language barrier is an obstacle that interferes with communication between people using their native language(s). A student's ability to comprehend classroom material, their ability to understand teacher instructions, and to communicate their thoughts clearly may be affected by the presence of a language barrier.

Student engagement refers to the extent to which students participate actively and meaningfully in the learning process. Student engagement involves behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements of the student's participation in the learning activity [11]. This may include active listening, participating in classroom discussions, completing classroom work and cooperating with teachers and peers.

Primary school engagement is especially significant for fostering a student's academic growth, social growth, and attitudes toward learning. Migrant students who face a language barrier in their new country will likely be less engaged than non-migrant students. Egert et al. [1] found that when a student does not know what is being said in class, they are less likely to participate and often become disengaged from other classroom learning opportunities.

Effective teacher-student interaction is an essential element of good teaching and learning. Where there is little or no interaction between teachers and students, the potential for instructional support and student feedback will be limited; and where the use of the English

language in classroom interactions creates a barrier for either party, the ability of teachers to provide accurate assessments of their students' understanding will be reduced.

Okoli and Nweke [5] also noted that teachers of migrant students typically encounter significant barriers when communicating ideas and/or providing directions to their migrant students due to communication obstacles. Okoli and Nweke [5] also noted that teachers in linguistically diverse classrooms frequently struggle to manage classroom interactions as well. Additionally, UNESCO [4] stated that teachers within a linguistically diverse classroom may need additional teaching strategies and teacher professional development to accommodate the needs of those migrant students who have lower levels of linguistic proficiency.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises the importance of language and social interaction in the learning process. The theory is relevant to this study because language barriers can disrupt communication between students, teachers, and peers. As a result, Spanish-speaking migrant students at Grove Primary School may experience reduced participation, limited classroom interaction, and lower overall classroom engagement. The framework is informed by Vygotsky's account of socially mediated learning [12].

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods descriptive case study design. The case study component allowed the researcher to examine the experiences of Spanish-speaking migrant students and their teachers within the natural setting of Grove Primary School. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured teacher interviews and classroom observations, while the quantitative descriptive component consisted of closed-ended student questionnaire responses that were summarised using frequencies and percentages. This design was suitable because it enabled the researcher to capture participants' explanations, observed behaviours and simple numerical summaries to gain a better understanding of how language barriers affected classroom engagement [13,14].

Population, Sample and Sampling

The target population included the Spanish-speaking migrant students attending Grove Primary School and teachers teaching Grades 4-6. The sample consisted of 20 participants: 15 migrant Spanish-speaking students in Grades 4-6 and five teachers who directly taught one or more Spanish-speaking students. The students came from different age groups, grade levels, and years of enrolment; however, they were all taught using English as an additional language.

Participants were selected based on characteristics directly relevant to the study; therefore, purposive sampling was used [15]. The inclusion criteria for the students were: (a) enrolled at Grove Primary School, (b) migrated from a Spanish-speaking country or Spanish was the main language in the home, (c) had limited English proficiency as indicated by the class teacher, and (d) parents/guardians consented to their participation. Criteria for inclusion as a teacher were: (1) the teacher worked at Grove Primary School, (2) taught at least one of the migrant Spanish-speaking children, and (3) agreed to participate. Students and teachers who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study. The purposive sample thus represented participants who personally experienced the language and engagement issues under investigation.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using semi-structured teacher interviews, a student questionnaire, and a classroom observation checklist. The teacher interviews provided detailed information about language challenges, student understanding of instructions, participation in class, interaction with teachers and peers, and support strategies. The questionnaire included primarily closed-ended questions that provided descriptive counts of responses and also spaces to allow students to note the types of supports that helped them. An observation checklist for the classroom was used to document observable engagement behaviours in lessons. These three instruments helped to triangulate questionnaire responses, teacher explanations, and observed classroom behaviours [13,14].

The semi-structured interview combined with the student questionnaire and classroom observation checklist enabled the researcher to obtain relevant data regarding the classroom participation, communication, and overall engagement that were affected by language barriers. The researcher also used more than one instrument to enhance the study by comparing information from various instruments to ensure triangulation and credibility of the study findings [13,14].

Data collection procedures were structured to ensure consistency throughout the study. Before data collection, the necessary institutional approval and participant consent were obtained. Consent from teachers was obtained, and consent from parents of children who were involved in the study was obtained.

The student questionnaire was presented in a language-friendly way, as the participants were not very proficient in English. The questionnaire was provided in English and Spanish. A bilingual assistant was used to explain the questions orally in Spanish whenever clarification was needed. Students were allowed to record responses without being rushed, and the administrator avoided leading them towards a particular answer. These procedures minimised the chance that the students' responses were due to difficulty in interpreting the instrument as opposed to their actual classroom experiences. Completed responses were sorted and tabulated for analysis in terms of frequencies and percentages.

Operational Definition of Classroom Engagement

For this study, classroom engagement was operationalised as students' observable and reported involvement in learning across three dimensions. Behavioural engagement encompassed: listening to the teacher, obeying instructions, answering or asking questions, completing assigned tasks, participating in discussions, group activities and interacting with peers. Emotional engagement included confidence, willingness to participate, comfort communicating in English, interest in lessons and reluctance or fear when responding. Cognitive engagement included understanding instructions and vocabulary, concentrating on lesson content, attempting tasks independently, seeking clarification and using strategies or support to understand. The observation checklist was aligned with these dimensions: participation, task completion and peer interaction represented behavioural engagement; confidence, willingness and signs of withdrawal represented emotional engagement; and comprehension, sustained attention, help-seeking, and persistence represented cognitive engagement.

Validity and Reliability

The researcher employed standardised procedures in conducting interviews, student questionnaires, and classroom observations

to enhance reliability. Triangulation of data was also done through the comparison of the data obtained from the interview, the questionnaire and the classroom observation checklist. This helped to identify common patterns in findings and enhanced the validity of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent: Participation in this study was voluntary. Before data collection, approval was obtained from the Ministry of Education, Guyana. Informed consent was obtained from the participating teachers, and parental or guardian consent was obtained for all participating students.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: The identity of each participant was kept confidential during the study. No personal information was given, and reports were anonymous. Data were stored securely and were only accessible by the researcher.

Minimisation of Harm: The study posed no significant risk or harm to participants. Observations were done during regular teaching and learning hours to minimise disruption. Questionnaires were administered at an appropriate time to avoid stress and inconvenience to the participants. Participants also had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Respect and Cultural Sensitivity: Special efforts were made to address the cultural and linguistic context of the Spanish-speaking migrant students. The researcher treated all interactions with respect, sensitivity and awareness of language differences. This helped to create an atmosphere of trust and comfort for the participants.

Results

Language Barriers and Participation

To answer Research Question One, analysis was done in the form of descriptive analysis using teachers' and students' responses. The analysis was conducted on the following aspects: language problems that teachers observed, language problems that were reported by the students, understanding of the classroom instructions, types of support that helped the students understand lessons, students' level of participation in the classroom, and students' participation in classroom discussions. The effect of the language barrier on the students' ability to understand, express, write and follow instructions and actively participate in their daily classroom learning was presented in the form of frequencies and percentages.

The language challenges reported by the Spanish-speaking migrant students are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Language Challenges Faced by Students.

Language Challenges Faced by Students	Number of Students	Percentage
I do not understand the instructions	3	20.0%
I find it hard to speak English	4	26.7%
I am afraid to participate	2	13.3%
I cannot understand some words	4	26.7%
I have difficulty writing in English	2	13.3%
Total	15	100%

As shown in Table 1, difficulty speaking English and understanding unfamiliar words were the most frequently reported language challenges. The most frequently selected challenges were "I find it hard to speak English" and "I cannot understand some words",

with four students (26.7%) selecting each response. Three students (20.0%) reported difficulty understanding instructions. Two students (13.3%) reported being afraid to participate, and two students (13.3%) reported difficulty writing in English.

The results show that speaking English and understanding unfamiliar vocabulary were the most common difficulties. These challenges may reduce students' confidence, limit their ability to respond orally and make it harder to follow lesson content. Difficulties with instructions, writing and fear of participation further indicate that the language barrier affected behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement.

Teachers' perceptions of the students' ability to understand classroom instructions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' Understanding of Instructions.

Understanding of Instructions	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Fairly well	1	20%
Limited	3	60%
Very limited	1	20%
Total	5	100%

As shown in Table 2, most teachers indicated that the students had a limited understanding of classroom instructions. This result indicates that the majority of teachers who responded to this question stated that students struggled with instructions. This may affect participation because students who are unsure of what to do may remain silent, avoid tasks or rely on others for support.

Teachers' perceptions of the students' level of classroom participation are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Level of Participation.

Level of Participation	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Moderately active	1	20%
Mostly passive	3	60%
Very passive	1	20%
Total	5	100%

As indicated in Table 3, most teachers described the Spanish-speaking migrant students as mostly passive during classroom activities. The results indicate that a low level of active class participation was attributed to language barriers. The majority of teachers reported that students were passive. The passivity may have stemmed from students' inability to comprehend instructions, limited vocabulary in English, and the fear of speaking English incorrectly.

Language Barriers and Interaction

To answer Research Question Two, analysis was done in the form of descriptive analysis using teacher and student response data. The analysis focused on how language barriers affected teacher-student interaction, peer interaction, and the strategies used to support classroom communication. The students' responses were also analysed to identify the types of support they believed would improve their interaction and understanding in class. Frequencies and percentages were used to show how language barriers limited communication with teachers and classmates, as well as how strategies such as visuals, translation, peer support, simplified language, slow speech, and extra time helped to reduce interaction difficulties.

Teachers' perceptions of the influence of language barriers on teacher-student interaction are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Teacher-Student Interaction.

Teacher Interaction	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Slightly	1	20%
Moderately	4	80%
Total	5	100%

As shown in Table 4, four of the five teachers reported that language barriers moderately affected their interactions with students. This suggests that teachers experienced difficulty giving instructions, explaining lessons, checking understanding and encouraging students to respond when communication depended mainly on English.

Teachers' perceptions of the students' interactions with their classmates are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Peer Interaction.

Peer Interaction	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Somewhat easy	1	20%
Limited	3	60%
Very little	1	20%
Total	5	100%

As indicated in Table 5, most teachers reported that peer interaction among the Spanish-speaking migrant students was limited. This indicates that language barriers affected the students' ability to communicate freely with their peers. Peer interaction involves speaking, listening, and comprehending English; Spanish-speaking migrant students may have struggled with participation in group work, seeking assistance from their classmates, and/or participating in informal classroom discussion.

The forms of classroom support preferred by the students are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: How Teachers Can Better Support Students.

How Teachers Can Better Support Students	Number of Students	Percentage
Speak more slowly	4	26.7%
Use simpler words	3	20.0%
Use more pictures and visual aids	3	20.0%
Allow classmates to help me	2	13.3%
Give more time to complete work	3	20.0%
Total	15	100%

As shown in Table 6, the students identified slower speech, simpler words, visual aids, peer support and additional time as helpful classroom strategies. The results indicated that students required assistance to enhance their interactions and understanding in the classroom. The findings indicate that students believed their classroom understanding and interaction could be improved if teachers spoke more slowly, used simpler language, provided visual aids, allowed peer support and gave additional time to complete tasks. This indicates that student interaction was greater when teachers adapted their communication style to the students' language needs.

Discussion

Participation during Classroom Instruction

For Research Question 1, the results indicated that language barriers negatively affected the participation of Spanish-speaking migrant students in daily classroom instruction. Difficulty with speaking, reading, writing, and listening was reported by teachers, with speaking as the primary difficulty. This was also reflected in the student responses, with students stating that they found it hard to speak English, understand some English words, follow instructions, and write in English. These findings are supported by the literature reviewed in this study, which indicated that learning through a second language can affect students' ability to comprehend, communicate and participate in classroom activities [1,2]. The literature also established that language is central to teaching, learning and communication in the primary school setting.

The findings can also be explained in the context of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory [12]. The theory focuses on the significance of language in learning and socialisation. Thus, when Spanish-speaking migrant students experience difficulty comprehending and/or using English, they are less able to ask questions, respond to teachers, and participate in classroom activities. This indicates that language barriers impacted opportunities for students to participate in meaningful instruction throughout the day.

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Interaction with Teachers and Peers

The student responses further supported this finding. Some students stated that classmates helped them understand lessons, while others suggested that teachers should allow classmates to help them. This indicates that even some peer interaction can help mitigate some of the effects of language barriers. This is related to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory [12], which states that learning occurs through social interaction with others, such as a teacher or peers. The theory also emphasises the role of more knowledgeable persons in supporting students in developing within the Zone of Proximal Development.

The results are also connected to the theoretical framework outlined in this study. The framework explained that language

barriers can prevent students from answering questions properly and communicating effectively with teachers and peers. The findings confirmed this, as students needed support such as slow explanations, simple English, visual aids, translation, peer support, and more time to complete tasks. Hence, language barriers affected academic interactions and social interactions within the classroom.

The findings also align with UNESCO's [4] position that schools with linguistically diverse students need teaching strategies and teacher support to meet migrant students' needs. The teachers in this study considered visuals, translation, peer support and simplified language to be useful strategies. Students also confirmed the need for support, stating that teachers should speak more slowly, use simpler words, use more pictures and visual aids, allow classmates to help, and give more time to complete work. This demonstrates that both teachers and students were aware of the need to tailor teaching to minimise language barriers.

The findings are also supported by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory [12]. The theory suggests that students learn through social interaction and teacher and peer support. Teachers in this study indicated the need for scaffolding by using visual aids, simplified language, translation, repeated explanations, and peer support. These strategies supported students in making sense of lessons and becoming more involved in classroom activities. As such, teachers identified language barriers as a significant barrier to the participation of Spanish-speaking migrant students in the classroom and were aware that the use of appropriate support strategies could enhance the classroom participation of Spanish-speaking migrant students.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that language barriers had a negative impact on the classroom engagement of Spanish-speaking migrant students at Grove Primary School. The results indicated that limited English proficiency (LEP) hindered students' understanding of instructions, involvement in lessons, communication with teachers, peer interaction, and the ability to engage in class discussions.

The study also found that language barriers affected the different dimensions of classroom engagement. Behavioural engagement was affected because students were mostly passive, participated less in class activities, and rarely joined class discussions. Emotional engagement was affected because some students were reluctant to participate and lacked confidence when communicating in English. Cognitive engagement was affected since students struggled to interpret instructions, vocabulary, and lesson content.

It can also be concluded that support strategies play an important role in minimising the negative impact of language barriers. Strategies such as speaking slowly, using simple English, using pictures and visual aids, repeating instructions, allowing peer support, using translation when necessary, and giving extra time can help Spanish-speaking migrant students understand lessons and participate more actively.

Finally, this study addressed the research questions by demonstrating that students' participation and interaction were negatively affected by language barriers, as reflected in teacher perceptions and student responses to language barriers. The results validated the notion that language is crucial to learning, communication, and classroom participation.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to one primary school and a small purposively

selected sample of 15 Spanish-speaking migrant students and five teachers. The conclusions are thus limited to issues experienced at Grove Primary School and are not necessarily representative of all migrant learners or schools in Guyana. Additionally, teacher perceptions and student self-reports were included, which could have been affected by memory, interpretation, or the need for socially appropriate responses. Credibility was further developed through classroom observations and triangulation, but the observations were done during a short period, and this does not necessarily indicate the attitudes of the students towards engagement in all subjects, with all teachers or during the school term. Oral explanation minimised language-related misunderstanding, but it did not remove all the differences in understanding the items on the questionnaire.

Recommendations

- Teachers should use simple English when giving instructions and explaining lessons to Spanish-speaking migrant students.
- Teachers should speak slowly and repeat important instructions to ensure that students understand what they are expected to do.
- Teachers should use more visual aids, such as pictures, charts, diagrams, flashcards, videos, and real objects, to support students' understanding of lesson content.
- Teachers should allow peer support in the classroom by pairing Spanish-speaking migrant students with helpful classmates who can assist them during activities.
- Teachers should use translation support where possible, such as bilingual word lists, translated instructions, or simple Spanish-English classroom vocabulary charts.
- Schools should provide professional development for teachers on how to support migrant students and students with limited English proficiency.
- Teachers should create a classroom environment where students feel comfortable asking questions, participating in discussions, and making mistakes while learning English.

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