

Multilingual Communication Experiences of Foreign Migrants in China During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a series of language-related challenges confronting linguistically diverse populations worldwide. Given that China has emerged as an ideal destination for international students and workers seeking upward mobility, it is essential to investigate how foreigners working in China get access to public health information. Adopting the concept of multilingual crisis communication, this study examines the multilingual communication experiences of a cohort of foreign workers working for one of the biggest nightclubs in the Southwestern region of China. Data were collected based on the semi-structured interview with five foreign dancers and their high-stake holders, including a Chinese boss and a Chinese dance director. It was found that foreign migrant dancers were confronted with various language barriers in understanding Putonghua and English-mediated communication resources. The finding also indicated that their access to public health information was facilitated by their use of translation applications, with the support of their Chinese friends and foreign colleagues whose multilingual repertoires constituted an essential medium for effective communication. This paper closes by providing practical suggestions, like offering other smaller languages and official language training services for foreign migrants of diverse linguistic backgrounds, mainly from peripheral countries.

Keywords: multilingual crisis communication, language barriers, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Research Background

China has become a popular destination for foreign migrants as the statistics from National Immigration Administration demonstrate that—in 2019, the number of entry-exit personnel reached 670 million in China (the number of entry-exit personnel in 2019, 2019). With many foreigners emerging in China, topics on multilingualism have become the “headline news” in sociolinguistics. Han, H, M analyzes grassroots multilingualism (2013), and Piller, Li Jia, and Zhang Jie propose the concept of multilingual crisis communication (2020).

The 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 has brought global issues related to multilingual conversation to the fore like never before. Multilingualism in China’s public sphere came into the spotlight shortly after the coronavirus was officially confirmed on the 20th of January 2020 (Li, 2020). However, global public communication is conducted through a small number of the world’s languages (Piller, Zhang, & Li, 2020). These studies indicate that knowledge and effective information about COVID-19 were severely controlled by a few languages when the whole world was set into the pandemic and obtaining up-to-date information about the constantly changing situation of COVID-19 remains a significant challenge. On Earth, it is common that the exclusion of linguistic minorities from impartial and fair access to social participation (Avineri et al., 2018; Piller, 2016a).

Nowadays, much research on multilingual communication is from Anglophone countries. As a border province, Yunnan is not only a gathering place for minorities in China but also China’s window to South Asia and Southeast Asia. According to statistics presented in Table 1, in 2010, in China, the three top destinations for foreign migrants were Guangdong, Shanghai, and Beijing. Ten years later, taking the place of Shanghai, Yunnan became the second top destination for foreign migrants. In recent years, foreigners as diverse in Yunnan include international students and international migrants of underprivileged backgrounds. In 2017, over 80 percent of international students in Yunnan were from Southeast Asia and South Asia (Yun & Zhu, 2017). There is no doubt that Yunnan has transformed into a multilingual and multicultural social community. However, in practice, a gap exists in addressing the language needs of foreign migrants from non-Anglophone countries.

Table 1. Yunnan as the 2ed top foreign migrants' destination in China (Major Figures on 2010 population census of China, 2010; Major Figures on 2020 population census of China, 2020)

Top three receiving province/city	Number of foreigners	
	2012	2022
1st	Guangdong 31.6138	Guangdong 41.8509
2nd	Shanghai 20.8602	Yunnan 37.9281
3rd	Beijing 10.7445	Shanghai 16.3954

This study focuses on five foreign workers working for one of the biggest nightclubs in Kunming, Yunnan, examines their multilingual communication experience during the pandemic, tries to find challenges confronting these foreign migrants and their efforts to overcome barriers in crisis communication, and the limitation of their strategies and some practical suggestions are also analyzed.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of multilingual crisis communication (Piller, Zhang, & Li, 2020) was applied in this study. The outbreak of COVID-19 provides the opportunity to examine how multilingual communication was handled in emergent events, particularly to language minorities and foreign migrants. So many people worldwide have never engaged with such multilingual communication during COVID-19. Nonetheless, language barriers existing in multilingual communication mainly lie in the two lenses. Firstly, multilingual communication is limited only to a few languages. Second, English-centric multilingualism is rooted in people's minds globally. Some response strategies are also covered in the article.

2.1 Inadequate Languages in Crisis Communication

COVID-19 has revealed gaps in theory and practice in multilingual communication. Multilingual communication emphasizes language variety, but in practice, most of the world's 195 states operate in one or two national languages only, and linguistic minorities within those states, whether indigenous or migrant, face significant language barriers at the best of times (Piller, Zhang, & Li, 2020). Delivering public health information and other public service information does not present linguistic diversity. As the first battlefield of the virus, Wuhan in China encountered various linguistic problems. Although volunteers offered translation services, only seven languages were covered: English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. Moreover, English is in the highest status. During the pandemic, it is presented that imbalanced language services cannot meet the need for multilingual crisis communication (Zhang & Wu, 2020). In the worldwide pandemic, every individual is deemed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the risk of the virus, which means everyone has the right to receive timely information and realize the constantly changing situation of the pandemic. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) only provides information in the six official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish) and three additional languages (German, Hindi, and Portuguese) ("Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic", 2020). The inadequacy of languages does not meet the healthy need of other language-speaking people. Putonghua is the only national language and standard variety in China, a multilingual and multicultural community. However, in daily communication, most people speak local dialects instead of Putonghua. During COVID-19, it is recognized that Putonghua was not sufficient in the country to deliver effective healthy information to every signal man and to stem the spread of the virus.

In short, in crises like COVID-19, many public health problems were caused by the lack of language or poor communication. People without sufficient knowledge of local dominant languages will be excluded from healthy matters, like containing the wide spread of COVID-19, getting vaccines, and advocating some related policies. COVID-19 not only results in physical problems but also brings mental problems. With insufficient and ineffective information, individuals easily get trapped in bad feelings.

2.2 English-Centric Multilingualism in Crisis Communication

English is the unquestioned lingua franca nowadays. In the past decade, besides Anglophone countries, most nations have significantly invested in increasing their English capabilities (Phillipson, 2003; Piller & Cho, 2013; Takahashi, 2013). Moreover, for China and the whole world, intercultural communication is closely related to English (Piller, 2017). English has a predominant status in education in China, making China, after the USA, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan, the fifth-largest national population of English speakers in the world (List of countries by English-speaking population, 2020).

English is just an imagined powerful language. This pandemic has revealed the fallacy of believing in English as the universal language for global communication problems. Although the World Health Organization (WHO)

makes information available in several different languages, English is in the predominate status for providing timely information and holding press conferences globally (Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, 2020). Linguistic minorities worldwide struggle to obtain such health in their native language (Avineri et al., 2018; Briggs, 2018; Flood et al., 2018; Rubin, 2014). To improve the efficiency of anti-COVID-19, providing multilingual logistics communication is necessary (Zhang & Wu, 2020). It is demonstrated that English cannot meet the demands of people on Earth, especially during the crisis period, and the pandemic has sped down the influence of English.

2.3 Strategies

Top-down and button-up efforts are the two main strategies to overcome the linguistic challenges rising from the pandemic (Piller, Zhang, & Li, 2020).

The top-down strategy is associated with national language competence. National language competence is the language competence of a state to deal with various domestic and foreign affairs (Li, 2011). In coping with a public crisis like COVID-19, mobilizing national emergency language competence (NELC) is necessary. The detailed capacity of NELC includes management, mobilization, intellectual, data, and technology capacity. Three stages are involved in constructing NELC, including the pre-emergency stage, the during-emergency stage, and the post-emergency stage. The aims of constructing NELC are achieving “barrier-free” language communication, providing emotional support to avoid mental damage after a disaster, and monitoring the crisis well. Some types of emergency languages are included in constructing NELC: standard national languages, non-standard varieties, minority languages, major international languages, cross-border languages and sign languages, and Braille (Li et al., 2020). All in all, the construction of NELC presents a nation’s power in overcoming linguistic challenges coming from natural disasters or pandemics. As the initial epicenter of COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, Wuhan met some language barriers because most Hubei residents speak Hubei dialects, which hindered the effectiveness of rescue. At that time, medical supplies were run out in China. Therefore, seeking foreign assistance was inevitable. By March 2020, 77 countries and 12 international organizations has donated emergency medical supplies to China. However, donation and assistance encountered linguistic barriers. To address this, “战疫语言服务团” [Language services group for epidemic prevention and control] was formed by China’s Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission. This group made outstanding contributions to fighting against COVID-19. The experts in the group published the handbook of Hubei Dialects for Medical Assistance Teams, the Guide to Prevention and Control of COVID-19. These linguistic experts helped Hubei local patients with effective rescue and facilitated international medical services.

The button-up strategy is organized by grassroots. In Wuhan, to provide better multilingual logistics communication service during the COVID-19 pandemic, 250 colleges students and teachers, frontline responders, medical staff, procurement agents, overseas donors, and foundation officers in Wuhan and across the world self-organized the WeChat Group “疫区翻译服务义工小组” [volunteer translation services for epidemic areas] to carry out crisis translation tasks. The group provided nine language translation services, covering English, French, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai, and Vietnamese. After receiving the interview, one of the volunteers in the group commented: “我觉得民间的速度好像更快一些, 比起政府一级级(审批)下来, 我自己的感觉。” [I think the grassroots efforts are more efficient than the top-down approach requiring governmental (approval) formalities. My impression] (Zhang & Wu, 2020). In Inner Mongolia, China, the traditional Mongolian art *khuuriin ülger* (‘fiddle story’) carrying public health information by Mongolian folk singers was a button-up strategy to restrain the spread of COVID-19 and comfort local people’s fear (Bai, 2020). During the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, some international students from South Asia and Southeast Asia, through their multilingual repertoire, also tried to combat the pandemic (Li et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

To gain a nuanced understanding of foreign migrants’ experiences in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, we interviewed seven participants working in one of the biggest nightclubs in a Southwestern region of China. Figure 1 is the group photo of us. Appendix A provides an overview of the participants, including five foreign dancers and their high-stake holders: a Chinese boss and a Chinese dance director. The designed questions are in Appendix B, which mostly are about their life and language experience during COVID-19 in China. Because a semi-structured interview was applied in the process, beyond the designed questions, other questions were also covered in the research, making contributions to the findings.

When collecting data for this research in September 2022, all foreign dancers have lived in China for five years, and three have the multilingual ability. The Chinese director, who learns English by herself and is responsible for teaching these foreign dancers to perform and announcing them to have COVID-19 test, and the Chinese boss

also could offer a perspective to understand the life experiences of these foreign migrants. Semi-structured interview and informal conversation were employed during the research to understand better these foreign dancers' life experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning of 2020 to September 2022.



Figure 1. The group photo (one of the author and four research participants)

4. Findings

Appendix A presents the participants' diverse backgrounds, including nationality, gender, language backgrounds, etc. The analysis of their language-related practices will be discussed from two perspectives: their language-related challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and strategies to overcome them.

4.1 Language-Related Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Firstly, all of these foreigners have limited Chinese proficiency. Through the Chinese boss, we realized these foreign dancers come to China through international market intermediaries, and Chinese proficiency is unessential. Although they have lived in China for over five years, only **M**, who is come from Columbia, can speak a little Chinese, the other four foreign participants do not comprehend Chinese, and what they usually use are “谢谢” [“thanks”] and “你好” [“hello”]. What is noteworthy is that besides **D**, the other four foreign dancers are not equipped with English proficiency. In the conversation with **D**, we knew that she learned business English in college in her country, but she is interested in dancing and dreamed of being a dancer one day. An international market intermediary allowed her to China to realize her dream, so she gave up her major and began her dancing journey in nightclubs in China. She fell in love with a Chinese boy in one city in China. Their communication is mainly through English. During the COVID-19 pandemic, because of these foreign migrants' lack of Chinese proficiency, they cannot get first-hand public health information on Chinese social media. They accessed relative news mainly through foreign social media. However, some foreign social media usually post false reports about China. American former President Trump used the “Chinese virus” on Twitter to show his discrimination against the Chinese (Zhu, 2020), which easily misled these foreign dancers' judgment and added to their anxiety during the particular time in China.

Second, their job specification hindered their path to learning Chinese. In the interview, all of them expressed a desire to learn Chinese. **A** and **B** have tried to study Putonghua on some applications, but the fee is too high and they gave up sooner. However, the main reason is their job specification. They work at night and rehearsal during the day, so they only have a little time to learn Chinese. Furthermore, when dancing on the stage in nightclubs, they perform and have no chance to communicate with Chinese guests. Additionally, international market intermediaries and workplaces do not provide language training programs, so they cannot receive formal language training. Although their dance director **G** has fluent English and Chinese proficiency, **G** communicates with them mainly through translation applications or gestures to maintain high work efficiency.

Third, their foreign look is a barrier to making Chinese friends. **E** said that almost every Chinese thinks she speaks English, and Chinese does not dare to speak with her because of Chinese people's poor English competence. The boss also expressed that he thought all foreigners could speak English fluently and wanted to learn English to make friends with them, but he had no time, and gave up this plan. In China, most people have

English education experience, but these foreign dancers' friend circle is limited to nightclub workers and guests whose English is poor. These workers and guests would not make friends actively with them. **D** has a boyfriend working as a DJ in one nightclub, so they have similar life routines. Facing COVID-19, **D** could ask her boyfriend for help, such as venting bad feelings during the lockdown period. But the other four dancers do not have many Chinese friends, which caused them some trouble in keeping relaxed during quarantine time.

Fourth, their stereotype on learning Chinese. In informal conversation, they said that they prefer learning English to Chinese. There are two reasons for that. Firstly, in their mindset, English is used more widely than Chinese, and learning English is more beneficial. Second, some social media mislead learners that Chinese is hard to learn. Therefore, they have a stereotype about learning Chinese, which chases away their courage to study it. In China, most public health information is presented in Chinese. Understanding this information troubles them a lot.

4.2 Strategies to Overcome Their Language-Related Challenges

Living in China, these foreign migrants have some strategies to overcome their linguistic barriers. These strategies facilitated their life during the COVID-19 lot, but their strategies still need to be improved.

Firstly, the use of translation applications. During our interview and informal conversation, these foreign dancers used translation applications due to language barriers. And when we asked them whether they use translation applications in daily life, they responded that translation applications had become their lifestyle in China. With the development of translation technology, translation applications make conversations between different languages more convenient. However, the accuracy of machine translation is in question today, and in the circumstance of the virus, some new expressions and words appeared. These foreign dancers said they could not understand the translation's meaning sometimes, so they had to change their expressions or use another translation application to fulfill the complete meaning, which caused a series embarrassed situations and made them misunderstand some Chinese policies related to the pandemic.

Second, Chinese agencies are their language brokers. It is mentioned before that, through international market intermediaries, every foreign dancer comes to China for work, and they have their Chinese agency in each area in China. The Chinese dance director told us that if these foreign dancers have troubles, like seeing a doctor, changing jobs, or moving workplaces, they could ask the agency to help them, but the service is not free. Due to the high cost, if they encounter some problems, especially in language, they are unwilling to ask for help. During COVID-19, sometimes they have no salary because of the close of nightclubs. **A** expressed that he comes to China mainly to make money, so he will not pay for high and unnecessary services.

Third, seeking help from people with Chinese competence. **D** often asks for help from his boyfriend, but the other four dancers are less lucky than **D**. Their look makes Chinese people keep their distance, and making Chinese friends during the crisis is more complicated. In dealing with language challenges, they have to depend on themselves more.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the multilingual communication experiences of foreign dancers of diverse linguistic backgrounds during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. The findings demonstrate that their Chinese proficiency needs to be improved to meet their crisis communication. Their job specification, foreign look, and stereotype of Chinese learning hinder their mobility from learning Chinese, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, they must turn to translation applications, agencies, and people with Chinese competence. The utility of these, however, is limited due to insufficient language provision and language training programs.

To maintain every signal man's health rights and comfort foreign migrant's feelings in the pandemic, as well as maintain social justice, other smaller languages should be offered to foreign migrants of diverse backgrounds. Although China boasts its national language competence in 101 foreign languages (Zhao, 2016), the national language is the primary language to make the pandemic announcement and deliver public health information. After the Chinese, influenced by the English-centric mindset, pandemic-related knowledge in English is also common in China. However, one or two language multilingualism has added heavy pressure and resulted in adverse social effects on other language speakers. In the modern era, translation applications can solve part of language-related problems, and access to translated information is not only a human right (Greenwood et al., 2017), but also is an approach to disaster prevention and relief that can increase individual and community-level resilience (Piller, Zhang, & Li, 2020). However, depending on translation application alone is not enough. The standard of translation information greatly influences accuracy, which will cause side effects. Offering limited languages, by the large, will badly affect people with a diverse background to obtain adequate and accurate information.

Governments and departments must see this difficulty and provide language training services for social integration. Apart from **D**, who has received formal English education in college, the other dancers and the Chinese dance director in the nightclub can be considered as grassroots language learners. Few grassroots learners can afford the time and tuition to require formal education and learn one language (Han, 2013). A significant gap exists between their language learning desire and high time and fee cost.

Finally, the foreign migrant is a symbol of a country's internationalization. Yunnan, as a border-line province, after the COVID-19 pandemic, will embrace more foreign migrants and shoulders more responsibility for facilitating internationalization. We should consider this group in constructing a new image of China worldwide and China's internationalization and globalization. Although it is proclaimed that the influence of COVID-19 has decreased in China in 2023, there are other disasters and crises. These foreign dancers' multilingual experience in China during COVID-19 could give us language-related ideas for future crisis prevention.

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Appendix A

Overview of Research Participants

Participants	Job position	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Years in China	Langue backgrounds
A	dancer	23	M	Columbia	Over 6	Portuguese, French
B	dancer	23	F	Columbia	Over 6	Portuguese, French, Putonghua (not proficient)
C	dancer	29	F	Republic of Belarus	5	Russian
D	dancer	27	F	Columbia	7	Portuguese, French, English
E	dancer	26	F	Brazil	6	Portuguese
F	boss	34	F	China		Putonghua, dialect
G	dancer director	28	M	China		Putonghua, English (very proficient), dialect

Appendix B

The designed Questions

- 1) Where are you from?
- 2) How long have you been in China?
- 3) How many languages can you speak?
- 4) How old are you?
- 5) In your country, how was your condition?
- 6) How do you think of your job in China?
- 7) Do you encounter some language barriers in China, and how do you solve them?
- 8) Did you try to learn Chinese? How did you learn it, and what was your feeling?

- 9) Do you think Chinese is difficult to learn?
- 10) Do you think learning Chinese is more complicated than learning English? Why?
- 11) Do you want to learn Chinese better? Why?
- 12) How do you get public health information during COVID-19? Could you share your life experience during the lockdown period?
- 13) You must meet some language barriers during COVID-19 and encounter some bad feeling, how did you overcome them?
- 14) Is the language used to convey public health information in China enough according to your experience?
- 15) If the Chinese government offers a free language training program or some language-related services, will you participate and why?

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