Language Concerns and Issues of Uyghur International Students in Japan

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Abstract

Through one-on-one in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, this study examines the language-related concerns and issues encountered by Uyghur international students, a Muslim minority from northwest China, at various stages of their migration journey, including pre-departure preparations, life and academic experiences in Japan, and future prospects. Through narrative and thematic analysis, we examine how their

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ethnic identity and linguistic strategies shape their academic experiences, social interactions, and daily lives. Our findings reveal that due to diverse educational backgrounds, these students demonstrate varying proficiency in Japanese, English, Chinese, and Uyghur, leading them to develop unique coping mechanisms using available linguistic resources. To cope with these language challenges and difficulties, they actively develop unique strategies by leveraging the linguistic resources available to them. To enhance the study-abroad experience for all international students, we argue that Japan should clarify study pathways at language schools, reduce initial adjustment burdens, and provide comprehensive information on higher education to facilitate a smoother academic transition. Moreover, structured language exchange programs and government-supported initiatives could help students integrate more effectively into society. For tightly connected ethnic groups like the Uyghurs, platforms that foster community-building and mutual support can be particularly beneficial. Ultimately, to promote the internationalization of higher education and address future talent shortages, Japan should strengthen language support services, improve accessibility to information, and foster an inclusive social environment to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds can thrive and contribute meaningfully to society.

Keywords: Uyghur, International Students, Language Concerns and Issues, Migration and Integration, Coping Strategies, Migration Linguistics

1. Introduction

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), international students are an important subset of migrants. While their primary purpose is education, and their stay is often temporary, they experience many of the same challenges as other migrants, including cultural adaptation and language barriers. Among these issues, language, notably, plays a central role in migrant integration (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Borlongan (2023) discussed the various factors affecting language in migratory contexts and distinguished the factors at play across the three phases of migration: pre-migration, during migration, and post-migration. This model clearly explains the purpose of migrants coming to the destination country, their experiences in the destination country, and their development after leaving or

staying in the destination country. The study abroad language experience of international students aligns with this model, as they prepare linguistically before departure, utilize all language resources in the host country, and later leverage these skills to create future opportunities, whether they stay or leave.

This study elucidates Uyghur international students' language concerns and issues in Japan through these three steps. The Uyghurs are Muslim inhabitants of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, located northwest of the People's Republic of China. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Chinese students studying in Japan has significantly rebounded. According to the latest data published by the Japanese Student Services Organization (JASSO), as of May 1, 2023, the total number of international students in Japan reached 279,274, marking an increase of 48,128 students from the previous year, which is a growth rate of 20.8%. Among them, students from Mainland China comprised the largest group, totaling 115,493, which represents an 11.2% increase compared to 2022 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2024). However, this number includes not only the Han Chinese, who are the biggest ethnic group in China, but also ethnic minorities such as the Uyghurs and Mongolians living in China. Specific data on Uyghur students studying in Japan is unavailable, as they are typically categorized as Chinese students in statistical records. However, given their distinct religious and linguistic backgrounds compared to the Han Chinese, it is both necessary and meaningful to explore their language experiences as a separate group.

The language education Uyghur students received prior to arriving in Japan varies significantly depending on their schooling options and experiences. Students may attend either bilingual schools or Chinese schools starting from elementary school. In bilingual schools, Uyghur is taught as the first language, Mandarin Chinese as the second language, and English as an elective. In contrast, Chinese schools prioritize Mandarin as the first language, with English taught as a foreign language, and do not offer instruction in Uyghur. As a result, students' language proficiencies differ based on their educational backgrounds. It should be noted that, aside from individual efforts to study Japanese, students are not typically exposed to Japanese language instruction before they arrive in Japan.

Japan is facing significant challenges due to its declining population and aging society. In response, the active recruitment of foreign talent has become a key focus of discussion. Data reveals that the number of foreign residents in Japan has increased, surpassing three million for

the first time in 2022 (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Among them, a significant portion of this talent pool enters Japan through the international education pathway. International education is an important channel of labor migration (Liu-Farrer, 2009). According to data published by the JASSO in 2024, approximately 44.3% of international students in Japan opted to pursue employment in the country after graduating in 2022 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2024). This trend indicates Japan's gradual shift towards greater acceptance of international talent as a strategy to address labor shortages and economic challenges. However, despite a considerable proportion of students expressing a desire to remain in Japan, many ultimately choose to leave. Not all international students who leave Japan after graduation do so because they are not willing to stay. Rather, many faces significant challenges, such as linguistic barriers, cultural adaptation difficulties, and social isolation, which ultimately challenge their ability to remain in Japan.

As the number and diversity of international students in Japan continue to grow, their linguistic concerns and challenges become increasingly complex. International higher education necessitates being more sensitive to multilingual diversity brought about by increased mobility, including the mobility of linguistic minorities (Borlongan & Lim, 2024). While the Japanese government provides localized and translated materials for administrative processes and daily life, and these measures have benefited many, many international students still encounter significant language barriers. This is particularly true for ethnic minority groups, whose specific linguistic, cultural, and religious needs often receive insufficient attention. As a predominantly monolingual society, Japan faces distinct challenges in accommodating such diversity.

As a nation committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Japan needs to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Strengthening language support is crucial for facilitating integration, ensuring academic success, and promoting long-term settlement. However, limited research has examined the language concerns and issues faced by international students from varied cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds in Japan. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the experiences of Uyghur minority students, shedding light on the broader linguistic and social integration challenges they encounter. The Uyghurs are a Muslim ethnic group with a rich linguistic heritage, possessing strong bilingual and multilingual traditions. In addition to their native Uyghur language, which belongs to the Turkic language family, many Uyghurs are

proficient in Mandarin due to the sociolinguistic context of their home region. Some also acquire additional languages such as Arabic, English, or other regional languages, further enriching their linguistic repertoire. By analyzing their language-related concerns and issues, and overall integration experiences, this research seeks to provide insights into how Japan can better support different background international students and address the needs of diverse communities. The findings will contribute to evidence-based policy recommendations, fostering more inclusive approaches to immigration and integration.

Given these objectives, this study will specifically address the following research questions to explore the language-related concerns and issues faced by Uyghur international students in Japan:

1. What are the language concerns and issues Uyghur international students encounter before, during, and after studying in Japan?
2. How have Uyghur international students addressed these language-related challenges?

These questions aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unique linguistic issues faced by Uyghur students and the strategies they employ to overcome these barriers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Challenges Faced by International Students Globally

Language-related concerns and issues are among the most significant challenges that international students face before, during and after their study abroad experience. These challenges affect their academic success, social integration, and psychological well-being. Before arriving in their host country, international students often struggle with understanding language requirements, admission procedures, and visa processes. Inaccurate information about the linguistic environment can result in inadequate preparation, making academic and social adaptation more difficult (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

Once in their host country, language barriers become more pronounced. Limited proficiency can hinder students' ability to understand lectures, engage in discussions, and complete assignments, leading to academic underperformance (Andrade, 2006). For international students, academic language proficiency is a critical factor affecting academic performance. Both students from non-English-speaking countries and those from English-speaking countries can encounter significant language barriers that affect their academic success (Mori, 2000;

Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Academic language proficiency is more than just conversational fluency. It includes mastering specialized academic vocabulary, writing conventions, and the ability to engage in scholarly discussions and presentations. Many international students face difficulties in academic settings due to limited academic language skills, even when they can communicate effectively in everyday contexts. For example, in the United States, students with lower English proficiency report higher levels of academic strain and lower GPAs (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006), suggesting that academic success is closely tied to language proficiency.

Moreover, language skills directly influence social integration, as students with lower proficiency often struggle to form friendships with local peers, leading to social isolation (Brown & Holloway, 2008). A study on Chinese students in English-speaking countries found that language difficulties led to cultural clustering, where students predominantly interacted within their own ethnic groups rather than integrating with the local community (Gu & Maley, 2008). Language anxiety is a common phenomenon among international students, particularly in academic settings where they must express their ideas and engage in discussions. For instance, in the United States, students with lower English proficiency reported higher levels of psychological distress, which also affected their academic performance and social integration (Yeh & Inose, 2003). In Japan, similar trends have been observed, where students with a higher proficiency in Japanese are better able to interact with local students and experience fewer mental health issues (Imai, 2020). However, even in countries with well-established English-medium programs, language anxiety can persist, as students grapple with the pressure of mastering academic language and meeting high academic expectations.

After graduation, language proficiency remains crucial for employment and social integration. Navigating bureaucratic systems, such as visa extensions and work permits, also demands strong language skills, creating additional stress during the transition from student to professional life (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

Building relationships and engaging in social activities is another area where language proficiency plays a crucial role. International students must develop social language skills to effectively engage with classmates, friends, and professors. Gao (2007) highlights the importance of social language learning for international students, noting that a lack of proficiency in social language can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion. Feng and Lee

(2013) further point out that graduate students, in particular, face challenges in forming social connections due to insufficient language skills, which can negatively affect their academic and psychological well-being.

2.2 Language Challenges Faced by International Students in Japan

Japan presents a unique linguistic environment for international students, as Japanese remains the primary language for daily communication, education, and employment. Despite efforts to promote English-medium programs, many university courses and administrative services are conducted in Japanese, posing significant challenges for non-native speakers (Rose & McKinley, 2018).

Many international students arrive in Japan with little to no Japanese proficiency, as language preparation programs outside Japan are often insufficient (Ota, 2018). Unlike English-speaking countries, where English is widely studied globally, Japanese is less commonly taught, making it more difficult for students to achieve adequate language skills before arrival. Hayashi (2008) explained the international students' entry period in Japan in detail. He pointed out that at the entry period, students feel both excitement and anxiety about Japan. Everything they see and hear feels fresh, and they try to adapt as quickly as possible to the sudden environmental changes in the host country, often in a state of being overwhelmed. Not only do the things they encounter feel novel but numerous tasks need to be done in quick succession. During the entry period, for example, international students in Japan face tasks such as completing school procedures, finding housing, settling down, registering as foreign residents, opening bank accounts, signing mobile phone contracts, and searching for part-time jobs, etc.

While Japanese language support programs are available at many universities, their limited scope might make it difficult to fully meet the academic and social needs of international students. This could lead to difficulties in understanding lectures, completing assignments, and participating in academic and social life. Despite achieving high scores on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), international students still face significant challenges in understanding course content delivered in Japanese (Iriyama & Sugimoto, 2022). These findings suggest that linguistic competence alone may not be sufficient for academic success, as students also need to develop a deep understanding of the academic culture and specific language used in their field of study (Cummins, 1981). Academic writing represents one of the most significant

challenges for international students, particularly when they are required to adhere to specific writing formats, citation norms, and academic standards. These challenges are exacerbated by the need to integrate into the academic culture, which can vary significantly across countries. In Japan, for instance, the emphasis on writing in Japanese can be especially challenging for students who may not have mastered the academic language of their field (Ogiso, 1991). Ogiso (1991) also highlights that many students, despite attending Japanese language schools for extended periods, find it difficult to understand lectures and navigate academic culture. This gap in proficiency further exacerbates the social and academic challenges that international students face.

Many international students wish to work in Japan after graduation, but Japanese language proficiency is a major barrier to employment. The language barrier in social interactions is compounded by cultural differences, making it harder for international students to feel a sense of belonging (Ogiso, 1991). Additionally, Japan's bureaucratic and work culture can be difficult to navigate without strong language skills, further complicating the transition to professional life.

While many studies focus on the language challenges faced by international students in Japan, there is a lack of research on students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly from minority groups such as Uyghur students. International students often encounter language-related concerns and issues before arriving in Japan, during their studies, and even after graduation. These concerns and issues can be even more complex for students with rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By examining the experiences of Uyghur students, this research provides a unique perspective that highlights both language and cultural adaptation challenges, addressing a critical gap in the existing literature. The findings can contribute to the development of targeted support services, such as enhanced language training and culturally responsive programs, ultimately fostering a more inclusive academic and professional environment in Japan.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study involved six Uyghur international students currently studying in Tokyo, Japan. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) They identified as Uyghur, an

ethnic minority from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China; (2) they all have student visas and are currently enrolled in a Japanese university or language school as international students; and (3) they had lived in Japan for at least one year to ensure that they had sufficient experience of the linguistic and non-linguistic challenges as international students.

Participants were recruited through personal networks and academic affiliations. A sample size of six students was selected to ensure a balance between obtaining detailed insights and maintaining feasibility for in-depth analysis. The cohort consisted of one language school student, one preparatory student, one undergraduate student, and three postgraduate students, thereby representing a range of educational levels and experiences. To ensure ethical compliance, the participants' anonymity has been preserved by using pseudonyms throughout this article. The age range of participants was between 23 to 30 at the time of the study. They had gone through various levels of Japanese from the Japanese Language School, and were pursuing undergraduate, masters or PhD programmes in varying majors (medicine, social sciences, psychology, and industrial design). Due to ethical considerations, we used English names to anonymize the participants. The basic information of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.   Participants' Information

Nick Name	Age	The current state of study	Major
David	27	Research Student	Industrial Design
Sarah	29	Master's Student	Psychology
Daniel	30	PhD Student	Social Science
Sam	28	Language School Student	Geography
Alina	23	Undergraduate Student	Medical
Martin	28	Master's Student	Medical

The linguistic proficiency of the participants varies significantly due to differences in their educational backgrounds and language learning experiences in China. While all participants received formal education in China, the primary language of instruction and exposure to additional languages differed among them. Some attended Chinese-medium schools (David and

Alina), where Mandarin became their dominant academic language, while others studied in Uyghur-medium schools (Sarah, Daniel, Sam, and Martin), maintaining strong proficiency in their heritage language. Additionally, their prior exposure to English and Japanese varied, influencing their language competencies upon arrival in Japan. As a result, their linguistic abilities before and after coming to Japan exhibit notable differences, reflecting the impact of their educational trajectories and language acquisition processes. Table 2 and Table 3 show their language proficiency before and one year after coming to Japan.

Table 2. Language Proficiency Before Coming to Japan

Name	Uyghur	Chinese	English	Japanese*
David	Native-like	Native	Advanced	None
Alina	Intermediate	Native	Intermediate	None
Sarah	Native	Native-like	None	N4
Sam	Native	Native	None	None
Martin	Native	Native	Intermediate	None
Daniel	Native	Native	Native-like	N2

* See https://www.jlpt.jp/sp/e/about/levelsummary.html for a summary of Japanese linguistic competence

Table 3. Language Proficiency After One Year of Arriving in Japan

Name	Uyghur	Chinese	English	Japanese
David	Near-native	Native	Advanced	Beginner
Alina	Intermediate	Native	Upper Intermediate	N2
Sarah	Native	Native-like	Intermediate	N2
Sam	Native	Native	Intermediate	N1
Martin	Native	Native	Upper Intermediate	N2
Daniel	Native	Native	Native-like	N1

3.2 Data Collection

One-on-one in-depth interviews and group discussions were chosen as the primary research method in this study. The interviews were conducted between October and December 2024 in a private setting, allowing participants to freely express their views, while the focus group interviews facilitated open discussions among participants with similar friend circles, which

encouraged interaction and the exchange of ideas. Interview questions focused on the following themes:

1. Pre-arrival language concerns and expectations.
2. Daily life language challenges (e.g., shopping, dealing with bureaucratic tasks).
3. Academic experiences, such as classroom instruction, peer interactions, and writing papers.
4. Social interactions with Japanese people and other international students.
5. Work-related language issues for those engaged in part-time jobs.
6. Future concerns regarding language proficiency and career opportunities.

Interviews were conducted in the languages preferred by the participants, predominantly Uyghur and Mandarin.

In addition, two focus group discussions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes and comprising three participants, were held to explore collective experiences and group dynamics. This approach facilitated the emergence of cultural and social insights that might not be captured through individual interviews alone. The focus group discussions centered on the following:

1. Shared challenges in adapting to Japanese society and academic life.
2. Experiences with language barriers in both academic and social settings.
3. Group reflections on how their Uyghur identity influenced their language experiences.

These discussions were semi-structured and conducted mostly in the Uyghur language, allowing participants to steer the conversation toward issues that mattered most to them. The first author participated in the interviews and discussions and translated excerpts.

3.3 Method of Data Analysis

In the study, data from one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover key themes related to students' language concerns and issues. The transcripts were coded using NVivo, starting with initial codes based on the study's questions and identifying unexpected emergent. After coding, larger patterns, or themes, emerged, including pre-arrival concerns (what students were worried about before arriving), daily life issues (like communication barriers), social interactions (how they adapted to socializing in a new language environment), academic challenges (such as writing

papers or understanding lectures), and future concerns (long-term plans like future careers or education). A cross-case analysis was then conducted to compare participants' experiences, highlighting both common and unique challenges. This method allowed us to capture a wide range of experiences and understand both common challenges and unique difficulties faced by different students.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Pre-Departure Concerns and Expectations

Before arriving in Japan, Uyghur students often grappled with concerns about finding adequate information on essential logistical processes, such as securing housing and accessing financial and communication services. This lack of clear guidance made them anxious about navigating these unfamiliar systems upon arrival. Settling in a foreign land, especially one where they lack fluency in the local language, added another layer of uncertainty, compounding their stress about adapting to daily life and managing complex bureaucratic tasks. Among these concerns, lack of proficiency in Japanese and uncertainty about the practicality of English were their main concerns. The six Uyghur students involved in this study had language proficiencies in Japanese ranging from A1 to B2 and English language proficiency ranging from B1 to C1. Due to the difficulty in obtaining information and entering Japanese universities from a foreign country, all of them involved transitioning to Japanese universities or graduate schools through language schools. Thus, they faced the additional hurdle of attending language school before higher education and were particularly concerned about the time and cost of learning Japanese. For an international student who is about to study in Japan, Japanese language proficiency, the long learning process of Japanese, and fear of competition with native Japanese students are issues that they value and worry about very much.

"…for me who has zero Japanese proficiency, before coming to Japan, I was worried about how I would go from learning Japanese to expressing myself to Japanese people and communicating, and competing with Japanese students in the same environment when studying abroad. I felt that this would be a big challenge compared to countries where people can communicate in English. I anticipated that it would be a relatively long process, so I felt worried." (David)

Before coming to Japan, this student was already concerned about the challenge of learning Japanese. During the interview, he expressed that while he believed learning Japanese would be important for him, improving his proficiency was not his immediate priority. His primary goal was to gain admission to a master's program, which required him to dedicate more time to reading relevant research papers and books. He anticipated that the lack of time and energy to properly focus on learning Japanese would cause significant concerns and add pressure.

All the Uyghur students participated in this study exhibited a certain level of English proficiency, but they questioned its usefulness in Japan, where the language is not commonly used in daily communication. They expressed concerns that, unlike globally dominant languages like English, Japanese has limited utility outside of Japan, which diminishes the perceived value of learning it. Consequently, they were hesitant to invest heavily in learning Japanese without a clear understanding of how it will benefit their future development. Some students pointed out that, in their view, Japanese people do not use English extensively or effectively. They specifically mentioned that when Japanese people speak English, their accents can be difficult to understand, which heightens their anxiety during interactions. This concern reflects a broader perception that Japanese society may not be a place where English can serve as a reliable tool for communication, limiting the ability of international students to rely on it as a fallback while navigating student life in Japan. However, it is important to recognize that English still plays a significant role as an alternative or auxiliary communication tool, especially among international students and in academic settings. Even though English may not be essential for everyday interactions in Japan, it remains a valuable means of communication with fellow international students and Japanese professors, particularly when Japanese proficiency is limited. The Uyghur

students seem to be aware of this, as evidenced by their continued reliance on English, despite their lower Japanese proficiency.

> "…in my impression, Japanese people don't like to use English very much. Before coming here, I watched a lot of videos about Japanese people speaking English and heard about Japanese English, but I felt that the accent was difficult to understand." (Sam)

The Uyghur students in this study expressed that, since they do not know Japanese, they hope to communicate more with Japanese people in English before they eventually learn Japanese. However, they were concerned that they cannot understand Japanese-accented English.

4.2 Concerns during the Studying process

4.2.1 *Daily Life*

Language barriers are considered an important driver of migrants' vulnerability (Molenaar & Van Praag, 2022). The interviews revealed that the Japanese housing system is particularly unfriendly to new international students. While financial resources are a key factor in securing quality housing, many landlords in Japan are hesitant to rent to foreigners. Those who are willing to have apartments leased to foreigners often require tenants to have Japanese language proficiency for daily communication, which is a major obstacle for newly arrived students with limited Japanese language proficiency. Additionally, most rental properties lack basic home appliances and need students to activate the utility system by themselves. This brought them a lot of mental pressure at the beginning of their study abroad life in Japan.

> "… Many of the places I liked wouldn't rent the house to me because I couldn't speak Japanese. People who don't speak Japanese have very limited housing options, and there are very few apartments available to newly-arrived students too. So, finding a house was my biggest challenge at first. The place I rented was completely empty, with no appliances and I needed to set up utilities by myself through phone calls, which was really hard because of the language barrier." (Martin)

In addition to these, there were many other small tasks to handle at once, making it a very busy time. The language barriers and cultural differences encountered during this period are one of the key factors contributing to students' later dissatisfaction with Japan (Hayashi, 2008, p. 3). Moreover, the inability to understand the paper mail delivered to their homes was also mentioned by the interviewees as one of the language issues. This includes documents related to insurance and housing contracts, payment notices, and subsidies for foreigners. Previous research has also pointed out that a lack of understanding of the importance of these documents can lead to various problems (Takeuchi & Aoki, 2017). Due to these language challenges, many Uyghur students rely heavily on translation tools and co-ethnic social networks for help.

> "…Whenever I go to the city hall or communicate with my landlord, I will use translation tools. Of course, sometimes I still cannot understand each other even with translation tools, so if I think it is important, I trust my Uyghur friends more than translation tools. Although the pace of life in Japan is very fast, they will always take time to translate for me." (Sarah)

4.2.2 *Academic Experiences*

Application Process

Most Uyghur international students choose to first attend a Japanese language school and then pursue further education at the university. This pathway allows them to gain more admission information, adapt to the new life in Japan, and improve their language skills all at the same time. In Japan, when applying for higher education, in particular for graduate studies, one needs to go through the following application process: First, one must browse the school's official website to find potential supervisors whose research fields match their own. Second, one must develop and write a research proposal for an upcoming study. Third, one must reach out to the prospective supervisor to discuss study plans. Fourth, one must prepare formal application materials and documents and register for the school entrance exam, which usually consists of a written exam and an interview. If the application is successful, the applicant will receive an acceptance letter from the university. It should be noted that there are some differences between humanities and science programs. The Japanese government has issued related policies discouraging students from privately contacting potential supervisors. However, these measures

have not been fully implemented, and for many fields, obtaining approval from a supervisor in advance is still required before registering for the exam.

Access to Admission Information

All Uyghur international students in this study faced significant language challenges as they went through the application process. One interviewee mentioned that he needed to rely on Google Translate to understand the important documents of acceptance. He thought the English version of the website had less information compared to the Japanese one.

> "…The English version of the website had less information than the Japanese one. I had to rely on Google Translate to understand important documents… Although I managed to solve some problems using translation tools, I felt like I spent a lot of time and energy, especially when checking the application information of Japanese universities." (David)

Due to students' poor Japanese language skills, they face significant challenges when getting information related to admission requirements, application deadlines, and application materials. Miyoshi (2023) has also pointed out that Korean and Nepalese international students faced the same issue, finding it very difficult to obtain information from Japanese university websites.

Search for Potential Supervisor

When connecting with potential supervisors, Uyghur students often choose to communicate in English. One interviewee shared that she believed the professor did not reply to her because the email was written in English. This may be due to some Japanese professors having limited English proficiency, which could lead to delayed responses or incomplete replies.

> "…I wrote many emails to different professors, but some of them completely ignored my email. I think the reason is that it was written in English." (Sarah)

Many Japanese universities require students to secure the approval of a supervisor before submitting their application, which intensifies the impact of language issues on the application process. Some students reported that their English emails were sometimes ignored, and they were not fluent enough in Japanese to communicate effectively. This language barrier can result in inefficient communication and further complicate the application process. Furthermore, limited English proficiency or the inconvenience of reading and responding to emails in English may be contributing factors to this issue. Some international students, particularly Chinese students, often send numerous emails to Japanese professors through third parties in an attempt to gain admission. While this might seem like a practical solution, it can be frustrating for Japanese professors and potentially lead to the neglect of students' emails. This practice may also reinforce the perception that Japanese professors are unresponsive to student inquiries.

Preparation of Application Materials

During the application process, students need to prepare numerous documents. Writing these documents in Japanese is a significant challenge for students with low Japanese language proficiency. One interviewee mentioned that he translated Japanese documents into Chinese and English to ensure he understood the documents, but he sometimes doubted the accuracy of the translation. This caused a lot of anxiety and pressure on him. These Uyghur students all hoped that their language schools would assist them with the details of applying for further education in Japanese since they had spent a significant amount of time and money in these schools. However, the language schools focused only on teaching basic Japanese knowledge but were not very willing to take responsibility for students' university application-related matters. A number of the students interviewed mentioned that the language school was just a way to extend their visa.

"… The pace at the language school was too slow. The quality of the lessons didn't match the high tuition fees either. Most of the people at language school weren't there to learn Japanese—they were just there for the visa. You learn Japanese more in daily life and self-study. I think if you rely on language school to improve your Japanese, it could take at least two years. Many people want to study in Japan, so even though the lessons aren't great, people still come just to get a visa." (Sam)

Many students in the interview also expressed the same sentiment because they had high expectations that language schools can help them with further education. However, after coming to Japan, they felt that language schools only cared about students' attendance rate, but did not want to take responsibility for students' further education.

Preparation for University Entrance Exams

The Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) primarily evaluates receptive language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading comprehension. In contrast, Japanese universities place greater emphasis on assessing productive language skills, such as writing and speaking. As a result, even students who have attained a high level of proficiency, such as passing the JLPT N1 or N2, may encounter substantial difficulties in meeting the demands of university entrance exams.

"…I passed JLPT N2 a year ago, and although the results for my current test haven't come out yet, I feel like I have already reached the N1 level. However, the moment I saw the questions in the written exam, I immediately felt that there was no way I could pass. I believe I can express my thoughts in Japanese, but being asked to write academic content in just one hour feels really unfair to me. I feel very frustrated because I've worked so hard..." (Daniel)

In the group discussion, some students also expressed that they faced similar issues during the entrance interview. Their Japanese speaking skills were not yet at a level where they

could clearly articulate their academic ideas. Moreover, one point that concerned them was the need to use honorific language during the interview, which added to their difficulties and stress. They recognize and respect Japanese honorifics because Uyghurs also has honorifics to address their elders. However, it took them a lot of effort to learn Japanese honorifics, and they worried about whether they were using them correctly, which placed pressure on them in examinations.

Writing Research Proposals

Writing a research proposal is a crucial part of the application process. There is a lot of language knowledge that needs to be paid attention to when writing in Japanese. Some vocabulary or grammar can only be used in oral communication, but not in writing. Many students expressed that when they were writing their research proposals, they needed to review repeatedly whether they used the correct written Japanese correctly.

> "…I felt that I still didn't trust my Japanese. So I asked my Uyghur friend to help me check my Japanese research proposal. As expected, I inadvertently used a lot of colloquial Japanese expressions, and she knew it at a glance because she has lived in Japan for ten years…" (Sam)

Most of the Uyghur students in this study struggled when writing their proposals in Japanese or English, which increased their workload and pressure. Some students mentioned that, due to their limited language skills, they struggled to fully demonstrate their research potential. In the focus group discussions, we found that the general process of Uyghur students writing research proposals was the same. They first wrote in Chinese, then used translation tools to translate their proposals into Japanese or English, and then had it checked by more experienced people. These experienced people were generally Uyghur scholars who have lived in Japan for a long time.

4.2.3 Actual Schooling

In Japanese universities, although some courses are offered in English, many are still taught primarily in Japanese. English can be used in university for basic communication between students and teachers. However, in most cases, Japanese still played an important role in more

in-depth communication. After enrolment, Uyghur students faced many language issues in different settings.

Class Lectures and Interactions

In the classroom, students' Japanese proficiency was the main barrier to understanding and participating in classroom discussions. An interviewee reported that he struggled to keep up with his course content, especially when it involved complex technical terms.

> "…. My courses and assignments were in Japanese, though. Since my Japanese wasn't very good, I negotiated with the teachers to submit my assignments in English. Our school didn't strictly require submissions to be in Japanese, so they didn't make it too hard for me. Still, there were some technical terms that I couldn't fully understand or grasp in class, but they were crucial to my field of study. So, after class, I studied the related English materials on my own to supplement my knowledge." (Martin)

Huntley (1993) highlights that international students frequently encounter difficulties in comprehending lectures, making notes, participating in classroom discussions, and composing written assignments. In Japan, many schools do not strictly require students to communicate in Japanese during class or submit assignments in Japanese. However, international students still struggle to keep up with the teacher's pace in class. This creates significant pressure for them.

Academic Papers

For Uyghur graduate students, completing academic tasks like academic papers and research reports in Japanese or in English is a considerable challenge. Although some students could write their papers in English, they still needed to do a lot of reading and research in Japanese, particularly when referencing Japanese academic literature. The language barrier becomes even more pronounced in this context. In order to integrate international research with local studies in Japan, students not only need to understand the literature in English but also interpret its content in Japanese. For Uyghur students whose English proficiency is not fully developed, this poses a

significant challenge. One student mentioned the difficulty of this task and the benefit it brings after the interview.

> "…My professor assigned me the task of translating an English paper into Japanese, which was extremely difficult for me because we (Uyghur) never really learned English. My Japanese isn't very good either, so translating English into Japanese feels like an even bigger challenge. The most difficult part is that the professor let me summarize the translated papers and present them at seminars, expecting me to explain the research in my own words. I've given two presentations, but I realize I still haven't been able to satisfy my professor, which makes me very anxious. However, this pressure has significantly improved my Japanese." (Sarah)

In the group discussion, some students also mentioned that they needed to spend additional time translating and understanding Japanese academic literature, which extended their research timeline.

Interactions with Fellow Students

In daily academic life, interaction with classmates is an important part of the experience. However, due to their limited Japanese skills, these students faced language barriers when communicating with Japanese classmates or other non-native English speakers, which in turn limited their social circle. Research has indicated that although international students with limited Japanese proficiency can receive guidance from their research advisors in English, they may face communication difficulties with other students in the research group who are not proficient in English (Chikada, 2011). This not only affects their ability to collaborate on schoolwork but also increases feelings of isolation.

"…I believe that even students who arrive in Japan with N1-level Japanese can't always communicate well with Japanese classmates because their Japanese is very different from what you learn in textbooks or language schools. In daily life, Japanese students often speak in a very abbreviated form of Japanese. If you communicate using the formal Japanese you've learned, the conversation can feel awkward, and the relationship won't be as close…" (Alina)

This difficulty in communication results in Uyghur students avoiding interacting with Japanese students and instead, they tend to gravitate towards more comfortable social groups, such as English-speaking foreign students, Chinese students, or circles of Uyghur friends.

4.2.4 *Social Interactions*

Uyghur students in Japan employ a diverse range of languages in different contexts, with their language choices being influenced by their social environment and interlocutors. Outside of academic settings, they often engage in code-switching between Uyghur, Mandarin, English, and Japanese depending on the individuals they are interacting with. Specifically, they communicate in Uyghur with friends or family, in Mandarin with peers from their language school, predominantly of Chinese background, in English with individuals from countries other than Japan or China, and in Japanese with Japanese language instructors and for essential daily tasks. While these multilingual practices facilitate social interaction and problem-solving in various contexts, they also constrain the students' ability to fully integrate into Japanese society. Due to their limited proficiency in Japanese, many Uyghur students encounter substantial difficulties in articulating complex ideas and comprehending spoken Japanese. This linguistic barrier frequently results in feelings of social isolation, as the students struggle to establish meaningful relationships with Japanese classmates and colleagues. One interviewee highlighted the emotional toll of this challenge, emphasizing the difficulty of engaging in profound communication with Japanese people when they are unable to express their emotions in any of the languages at their disposal.

"…I have Japanese friends. But to be honest, I really want to become close friends with them. I mean the real friends who can share the ups and downs of life. However, this seems difficult to achieve. Whether I communicate in Japanese or English, it always feels like I can't fully convey my emotions. Sometimes, things that I find funny aren't as amusing to the other person, and the situation becomes a little awkward. In the end, I have to deal with all my emotions on my own, and sometimes I feel helpless and just want to go home…" (Sarah)

Even though some Japanese people are willing to use simple English, Japanese remains the primary language of communication, and their lack of proficiency often results in communication breakdowns. In addition to language barriers, Uyghur students face difficulties related to cultural differences in social interactions. For example, they sometimes struggle to understand the subtle expectations of Japanese social etiquette or appropriate language to properly express respect. This combination of cultural and linguistic barriers further hampers their ability to interact with Japanese people. While some Japanese try their best to communicate with them, many do not speak English well enough for effective communication. Students often find themselves in situations where they speak in English but are met with blank stares. One participant shared an experience of trying to communicate in English, only to find that while the listener may understand them a bit, it was not sufficient to respond in English. As a minority group, Uyghur students in Japan rarely have the opportunity to use their native language Uyghur. This absence of a Uyghur-speaking environment makes communication of emotions difficult, as they are unable to converse in their most familiar language, increasing feelings of loneliness and stress.

4.2.5 *Work and Employment*

All six participants in this study are working part-time jobs, and their job choices are related to their Japanese language proficiency. One student, who had only been in Japan for six months and lacks sufficient Japanese skills at that time, chose to work at a convenience store. Most of the other students, whose Japanese is good enough to handle workplace communication, opted for translation-related jobs due to their proficiency in Mandarin, and English. Their workplaces

include clothing stores, eyewear shops, cosmetics stores, and drugstores in large malls frequented by Chinese and other foreign tourists. These jobs require a basic level of Japanese, but their translation and customer service skills in Mandarin and English are even more highly valued.

In the interviews, Uyghur students expressed the language challenges they faced in navigating job applications, understanding work instructions, communicating with Japanese co-workers, and handling customer interactions while they were looking for or working part-time jobs. Their limited proficiency in Japanese often leads to a lack of confidence and reliance on translation tools, which can further complicate their work experience and create barriers in both social and professional interactions at the workplace. For students working in customer service roles such as convenience stores, restaurants, or retail shops, interacting with customers in Japanese can be extremely challenging. They often faced difficulties when customers ask questions, place orders, or make requests, and their limited Japanese ability could lead to miscommunication, frustration, or dissatisfaction among customers. These circumstances cause Uyghur students to feel insecure or anxious in professional environments. They are often afraid of making language mistakes in formal settings, which can affect their performance or make them hesitant to take on more responsibilities at work. One participant described a language problem she encountered while working at a clothing store.

> "…There was one time when I didn't understand a customer's question, so I quickly ran to find a Japanese colleague to help me handle the situation. Honestly, I felt embarrassed because Japanese people don't like to bother others, and I didn't want to bother them either. But there was no other way. After this happened a few times, the store manager assigned me to the back to fold clothes, where I didn't have to interact with customers directly..." (Alina)

Most jobs in Japan require workers to understand detailed instructions in Japanese, but students who are still learning Japanese often struggle to comprehend these directives, leading to misunderstandings or mistakes at work. One participant recounted her early work experience in Japan, recalling the challenges she faced while working part-time due to the language barrier.

"…After three months, I realized that if I wanted to apply to graduate school, I needed to be able to communicate with the professor, so I started working part-time at 7-Eleven. Working there was quite a joke because I didn't fully understand the language. My co-workers would speak to me in Japanese, and I'd just nod and say 'はいはい (yes, yes),' even when I didn't understand. My co-workers would laugh and ask if I understood anything, to which I would still say 'はいはい.' One time, my boss told me I didn't do the task I was assigned, and I had to work an extra hour for free. I felt so embarrassed, but that was when I decided to improve my Japanese. I stopped fearing awkward situations and started speaking Japanese whenever I could." (Sarah)

However, nearly all participants mentioned that if they wanted to learn Japanese, especially speaking skills, working part-time was more effective than attending a language school. This is because part-time work forced them to overcome issues that prevent them from speaking, such as embarrassment or introverted personalities.

4.3 Future Plans and Opportunities

Uyghur students expressed a range of concerns about their language issues as they looked to the future. These included fears about limited occupational opportunities, cultural barriers, and social acceptance caused by a lack of Japanese proficiency. Additionally they were worried about balancing their language learning and maintaining proficiency in multiple languages, particularly English, which may be crucial for global career prospects. They are also concerned about their inability to pass their mother tongue, Uyghur, on to their children. Ultimately, they were concerned about failure to integrate into Japanese society.

When looking for jobs, some students have noticed that certain job postings in Japan explicitly state that they do not want foreign workers. Others subtly request native-level Japanese proficiency, which considers those who are biracial and grew up in Japan. However, for international students who learn Japanese from scratch, finding a job in the future will not be so easy from their perspective. In professional settings, Uyghur students fear that their limited

Japanese proficiency will hinder their ability to participate in meetings, negotiations, or client interactions, which are often conducted in Japanese. A medical student who was interviewed expressed her concerns about the future work environment.

> "…If I work in Japan, I might often need to communicate with patients who do not understand English at all. I also don't know if these patients will fully trust me or not. I don't want my professional abilities to be underestimated because of language issues. You know, being a doctor is not that easy..." (Alina)

For students in fields such as engineering, medicine, or research, the concern extends to the fear that their professionalism will be underestimated because of their language skills. One of the Uyghur students also expressed significant concern about the challenges of obtaining a driver's license in Japan, a topic that reflects broader anxieties among foreign residents regarding their future integration into Japanese society.

> "…I am not worried about my language ability, but my biggest concern is whether I will be able to obtain a driver's license in Japan in the future. I have read many rumors online saying that it is harder for foreigners to get a driver's license in Japan than it is to be admitted to a doctoral program. This has left me quite confused, as not having a car would significantly affect my efficiency and quality of life in the future." (Daniel)

While he indicated that his language proficiency was not a major worry, he emphasized that the potential difficulty of acquiring a driver's license was a substantial source of anxiety. Daniel referenced online rumors suggesting that obtaining a license as a foreigner in Japan could be even more difficult than gaining admission to a doctoral program, which adds to his confusion. This concern highlights the practical challenges faced by non-Japanese residents, where the lack of a driver's license could severely impact their daily life, affecting both their efficiency and overall quality of life. Such apprehensions suggest that systemic barriers related to licensure processes may contribute to feelings of exclusion and hinder the full integration of

foreign nationals into the local community. Addressing these concerns requires a closer examination of the administrative procedures involved and how they may disproportionately affect individuals who are already navigating complex cultural and linguistic challenges in their new environment.

Another concern for Uyghur students studying in Japan regarding their future is the confusion over prioritizing Japanese or English in their studies. For these students, Japanese and English are their third and fourth languages, compared to Uyghur and Chinese, which means they need to invest time and money to learn and improve in these two languages. However, since they do not yet have a clear plan for their future, this has led to further concerns. During focus group discussions, students mentioned that if they do not intend to stay in Japan, they feel they should prioritize improving their English skills. However, if they plan to develop their careers in Japan, they should focus more on improving their Japanese proficiency. Many students are aware that being proficient in Japanese can be a key factor in gaining permanent residency status. In reality, they are also aware that without proficiency in Japanese, they will continue to face barriers in building social relationships, understanding cultural nuances, and participating fully in community life. Due to time constraints, few students can master both foreign languages simultaneously.

Finally, these Uyghur international students were also concerned whether their children would be able to preserve the Uyghur language if they chose to continue living in Japan. This issue was also a key topic during focus group discussions. As a Muslim ethnic group, they feel that Japan's living environment is very friendly toward Muslims. This is reflected in the fact that people around them do not treat Muslims differently, halal food is relatively easy to find, and lot of big shopping malls are equipped with prayer rooms. However, the students believe that Japanese society is highly monolingual, and they worry that their children may not be able to maintain their native Uyghur language or effectively learn English. They think that if their children only learn Japanese, it will make their tongues "stiff", thus, making it difficult to pronounce other languages properly.

5. Recommendations

This article examined the language concerns and issues faced by Uyghur international students in Japan, which are similar to those experienced by many other international students. These

concerns arose before they arrived in Japan, during their studies, and after leaving Japan, affecting their academic success, social integration, and future career prospects. Given the difficulties non-native Japanese speakers encounter in Japanese universities, there is a need for more comprehensive language preparation and support to help students adapt more effectively.

First, the Japanese government should start by clarifying the educational objectives of language schools. Many language schools create the illusion of a high university admission rate before students arrive in Japan. However, in reality, most students achieve admission through their own efforts or with the help of third-party organizations rather than the schools themselves. The government should provide more diverse pathways for international students to pursue higher education, as many students who enroll in language schools do so for reasons unrelated to academic advancement as some simply want to experience Japanese culture, while others primarily aim to obtain a visa and focus on working.

Second, while it is neither feasible nor practical for the Japanese government to provide multilingual support for all languages, alternative approaches can be explored to better assist minority groups. Rather than attempting to provide comprehensive multilingual services, the government could focus on strengthening collaboration with existing community organizations that offer targeted support (for example, JU Academy Foundation in Japan).

Third, access to information about higher education should be improved. Currently, the *Study in Japan* website (https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/en/) serves as an official platform for international students seeking information about higher education in Japan. However, compared to *Study in Korea* (https://www.studyinkorea.go.kr/), the Japanese platform lacks several essential features that could significantly enhance its effectiveness and usability for prospective students. These include not supporting direct application submission and lacking a comprehensive scholarship database. Further, the platform does not offer personalized program matching tools. while the Korean system includes an interactive search function that allows students to enter their academic background, preferred fields of study, and career goals to find suitable universities and programs. Additionally, *Study in Japan* does not provide integrated student support services, and. there are issues with multilingual accessibility and overall user experience. *Study in Japan* is only available in Japanese or English, restricting access for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Finally, the navigation experience is less user-

friendly, which may discourage students unfamiliar with Japan's higher education system. Thus, a more integrated, centralized, and multilingual online platform should be developed.

Fourth, while Japan already has some university-level programs aimed at fostering interaction between local and international students, many of these initiatives remain informal, inconsistent, or limited in scale. Unlike the Erasmus+ language exchange programs in Europe, which provide structured and well-integrated opportunities for language and cultural exchange, Japan's existing programs often rely on voluntary student participation without institutional or governmental support.

To improve social integration, Japan could establish a nationwide, standardized language exchange program supported by universities and local governments. This initiative could include institutionalized tandem partnerships to ensure sustained participation, expanded conversation cafés and peer mentorship programs for consistent interaction, and collaboration with local governments to create community-based exchange events that connect international students with Japanese society beyond university settings. Additionally, integrating language exchange into academic curricula would incentivize participation, while a centralized online platform could facilitate student matching, structured discussions, and long-term language progress tracking. By expanding and standardizing these initiatives, Japan can create a more inclusive and engaging environment for international students, fostering deeper linguistic immersion and meaningful cross-cultural exchanges.

6. Conclusion

This article examined the language-related concerns and issues encountered by Uyghur international students at various stages of their migration journey, including pre-departure preparations, life and academic experiences in Japan, and their future prospects. For Uyghur students, language is not only a means of communication but is also a marker of identity. The struggle to maintain their native Uyghur language while learning new languages like Japanese and English highlights how language learning intersects with issues of culture and identity preservation, especially for minority groups with rich cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. This dynamic is distinct from the experiences of other international students and should be factored into how institutions provide support. In Japan, given the relatively small number of Uyghur students, there may be limited incentive for the Japanese government or

society to actively support their language needs. However, a more inclusive approach to supporting students from multilingual backgrounds would benefit all international students, fostering a more interculturally aware and linguistically diverse academic environment. This would, in turn, positively impact Japanese society, as it becomes more integrated into the global landscape.

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