

Original Article

Language, Structure, and Vulnerability: The Role of Linguistic Distance in the Institutional and Economic Experiences of Low-Wage Migrant Workers in Singapore

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Abstract - Despite the high proportion of migrant workers in Singapore, the structural significance of linguistic distance in migrant workers' institutional and economic experiences is not well studied. Using semi-structured interviews with seven migrant workers, this study investigated how limited English proficiency, compounded by the local variety of Singlish, affects low-wage migrant workers' understanding of their wages and contracts, their access to support mechanisms, and their overall well-being. These seven migrant workers were face-to-face interviewed and audio-recorded with their consent. Interview transcripts were analysed with Thematic Analysis and the results generated into 22 codes, which were summarised into 10 themes: Language proficiency, Contract comprehension, Communication difficulty, Grievance behaviour, Perceived safety, Payslip comprehension, Desire for a common language, Desire for English training by the employer, Pathway to recruitment, and Housing/living conditions. It found that language barriers had no equal impact on all areas of the workers' lives: in the context of payslips, workers with limited English reported them as understandable. At the same time, contracts remained poorly understood at the time of signing, particularly among workers recruited through agency pathways. Communication barriers were most pronounced in direct client interactions, not with the other migrant workers, and workers themselves often indicated that communication was the most critical and needed to be improved, viewing a common language and English training by the employer as something they desired. A near-universal rule of non-compliant behaviour was also found in the sample, existing across levels of tenure and levels of English fluency, implying a structural explanation, not just a linguistic explanation, related to Singapore's Work Permit system.

Keywords - Language barrier, Migrant workers, Singapore, Thematic analysis, Work permit system.

1. Introduction

1.1. Singapore's Migrant Workers

The current form of Singapore's economy is structurally reliant on migrant labour, something that is not often recognised. The foreign workforce numbers over 1.6 million, the vast majority of whom are migrant workers on work passes (Ministry of Manpower, 2025). Although they are vital to construction and manufacturing, their contribution and efforts are underutilised (Kai et al., 2014) and a broader pattern of low-wage labour migration across Asia (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). These workers are also massively located in industries where Singaporeans do not wish to work, making them at the same time indispensable to the Singapore economy (Kai et al., 2014). Most of these workers are from various countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Bangladesh and India (Kai et al., 2014). Much of the migration of these people is an economic necessity and an urgent need to earn income for their family in their own country, at a personal cost which is

often high (Lok, 2025). While the foundations to Singapore's emergence as a global economic centre are established, the lived realities of this workforce have largely been missing from the mainstream public discourse (Gupta, 2025). Despite their numerical significance, however, they reside in a condition of deep social marginality as their restricted mobility, dormitory accommodation, and lack of civic participation demonstrate.

1.2. Structural Vulnerability and Labour Precarity

Migrant workers are in a structurally specific and precarious position because their right to work and legal status is completely tied to their employer in the context of Singapore's Work Permit system (Ministry of Manpower, n.d.), which limits their right to work and legal status to a single employer (Platt et al., 2016). Many workers are also already in debt before taking up their job as they had paid recruitment fees of very high amounts to the overseas recruitment agencies and training centres (Baey & Yeoh,



2018). This indebtedness is not experienced by all migrant workers equally, but varies by gender and sector. It has been found that construction and domestic work create different forms of financial precarity and a restricted bargaining power for workers (Platt, Baey, Yeoh, Khoo, & Lam, 2017). In Singapore alone, recruitment costs are in the range of \$500 to \$2000, and it is often challenging to establish that a payoff is illegal even if it is outlawed (Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics n.d.).

The Work Permit also requires workers to be under the direction of a specific employer, and workers who refuse to have deductions made from their wages or to work in unsafe conditions are threatened with deportation to their country of origin, a common imbalance of power that undermines workers' rights to claim their rights (Platt et al., 2016). Then, those who ultimately end up choosing to resign lose the right to work in Singapore and have to find other jobs. Moreover, employment transfers without consent are not allowed, and if an employee is fired, he or she will be expected to return to the country and pay recruitment fees once again (Wee, Goh & Yeoh, 2018). This contrasts with other nations where there are more government-managed (compared to employer managed) systems of recruitment and remaining in the workplace that have been linked to improved job mobility and legal protections for migrant workers (Joyce, 2024). Moreover, mobility restrictions have been linked to worse safety outcomes for migrant workers even within similar systems (Lee & Cho, 2019). This implies that Singapore's employer-tied model is not the only available approach to managing labour migration. This systemic confinement is exacerbated by the fact that many workers are not aware of the terms and conditions of their contracts, since they have been drawn into the Singaporean labour system via a recruitment agency and not by any of the established institutional avenues (Gupta, 2025).

1.3. Language as Main Structural Barrier

Most low-income migrants in Singapore have a low level of proficiency in English or Mandarin, Singapore's working languages, and the gap between their fluency and these languages has measurable and far-reaching implications (Chiswick & Miller, 2012). Linguistic distance is the difference between the features of a learner's native language and the target country language (Chiswick & Miller, 2012). The further apart the languages are in terms of structure, the more difficult it is to transfer skills and knowledge (Chiswick & Miller, 2012). Research consistently shows that greater linguistic distance suppresses the initial transferability of human capital, resulting in lower wages and restricted occupational mobility that persists across the entire duration of a worker's employment abroad. In Singapore, the linguistic context is further complicated with the local version of English – Singlish (which is heavily influenced by Malay, Hokkien and Tamil) that significantly differs from standard English, so even those with previous English exposure may

find it difficult to understand basic workplace communication and daily interaction (McKay, 2013). Furthermore, many migrant workers had difficulty in comprehending Singlish mixed with other accents, and they were afraid of committing errors when speaking (Zaidi & Arrumsia, 2026).

Besides being a communication problem, limited English proficiency is also a strong social cue that signals workers' low skills and marginalisation in the highly segmented labour market of Singapore (Rubdy & McKay, 2013). Language ability influences the perception of workers by employers and supervisors, and workers who know English less well are often shut out of informal networks within the workplace that disseminate information on rights and pay (Gupta, 2025). Worse, language matters because it is crucial for a worker to be able to read their employment contract, to communicate with supervisors about unsafe working conditions, or access any systems put in place to protect the worker - and this lack is even evidenced among workers who report broadly positive experiences at work (Gupta, 2025).

Language barriers have a far-reaching impact, beyond the workplace. A review of the literature on migrant healthcare access identified that language is one of the most consistent and significant barriers to healthcare access faced by migrants around the world, not just in communication, but in navigating health systems, understanding diagnoses, and making informed choices about healthcare (Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025). In Singapore specifically, language and cultural barriers were identified as the most frequently cited obstacle to migrant workers accessing healthcare, as reported by 92.3% of surveyed doctors at public hospitals, reflecting healthcare providers' perceptions rather than workers' own accounts, demonstrating the extent to which communication deficits affect every dimension of workers' lives (Ang et al., 2020). Even though most countries have implemented mobile clinics and telehealth services around the world, the health care gap of migrant workers does not seem to be solved, as there are limited programs that are properly evaluated (Rast et al., 2025).

1.4. Mental Health and Well-being

Financial insecurity, family separation, and the constant fear of being separated from jobs or their legal status can all contribute to chronic stress among workers (Lok, 2025). Many of Singapore's low-wage migrant labourers reside in the dormitory setting, which offers minimal housing quality, but also can create greater social isolation because migrant workers have reduced access to the wider Singaporean community, and social interaction is restricted to the co-ethnic peer group (Platt et al., 2016). A qualitative study that involved semi-structured interviews with low-wage male migrant workers in Singapore revealed that chronic stress was related to a cluster of socio-structural and environmental stressors, mainly poor living, working, and social conditions, whilst the stressors associated with being perceived as

"foreign" were associated with anticipated stigma, concealment, and avoidance of healthcare (Farwin et al., 2023). The same study also highlighted the importance of tackling this mental health burden by sustaining further strengthening of labour and social protections for migrant workers (Farwin et al., 2023).

A worker's psychosocial vulnerability is further aggravated by the language barrier, as it limits their capacity to seek help when they are feeling distress (Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025). Financial strain and family responsibilities have been among the stressors identified for female migrant domestic workers, and the majority of the women typically engage in informal coping mechanisms when they are unable to get institutional support (Van Bortel, Martin, Anjara, & Nellums, 2019). This is particularly important in times of crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic saw home-based housing become a place of serious concern, as outbreaks began to occur rapidly in Singapore's high-density migrant worker dormitory (Yi et al., 2020). If workers are not able to communicate with healthcare workers, Social Workers or helpline staff, they are effectively shut out of the support infrastructure which is supposed to be there for them (Ang et al., 2020). It implies that migrant workers' mental health issues are also likely underreported and under-supported, as they do not have the language skills or trust in the system to speak out to the authorities about mental health problems (Gupta, 2025). Taken together, the literature on migrant workers in Singapore falls into three overlapping strands: structural/labour precarity research (Platt et al., 2016; Baey & Yeoh, 2018; Wee, Goh & Yeoh, 2018), health-access research (Ang et al., 2020; Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2025; Rast et al., 2025), and linguistic-distance research (Chiswick & Miller, 2012; McKay, 2013; Rubdy & McKay, 2013). This study draws on all three strands but connects them directly to primary qualitative data, which existing literature in each individual strand does not do.

1.5. This Present Study

Although previous studies have documented the structural precarity brought about by Singapore's Work Permit system (Platt et al., 2016; Wee, Goh & Yeoh, 2018), and the overall impact of linguistic distance on immigrant economic outcomes (Chiswick & Miller, 2012), few studies have examined the nature of linguistic distance at the different institutional interfaces that migrant workers encounter: on

contracts, payslips, grievance channels, and with regards to healthcare access and utilization, within a single sample. This gap matters because it obscures where language-based interventions would actually be effective: treating "language barrier" as one uniform problem risks directing resources (e.g., generic English training) at touchpoints where language is not, in fact, the primary obstacle. Using a qualitative methodology, this paper looks at the economic and institutional experiences of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore and the role of linguistic distance. It examines with the help of literature and primary data: the impact of linguistic distance on the understanding of workers' wages and contractual terms, how it limits access to support mechanisms and what strategies workers find to work around these in the absence of adequate support (Chiswick & Miller, 2012; Gupta, 2025; Platt et al., 2016). This paper brings attention to the problem of language as a structural problem, and not just a communication problem, thereby contributing to the current debate on how to improve migrant worker protections in real life.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to explore the impact of linguistic barriers on the life experiences and well-being of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore, and to determine which other structural and social factors interact with linguistic factors to influence these outcomes. Specifically, the study aimed to understand the implications of being limited in the English language and the added layer of difficulty of understanding Singlish on the workers' understanding of their wage and contractual arrangements, access to support and their wellbeing.

2.2. Participants

In all, 7 migrant workers were involved in this study, from two trades (namely horse care and general construction/plumbing) from two companies. The age of participants ranged from 20-47 years. Among the five respondents who said they came from a country, three came from India, two came from Malaysia and the country of origin was not recorded for the other two respondents (R1 and R5). All seven respondents had a job category; four were horse care workers, two were general construction and landscaping, and one was involved with plumbing.

Table 1. Shows the sample characteristics

Respondent	Age	Tenure in Singapore	Country of Origin	Profession
R1	45	2 years	Not recorded	Horse care
R2	20	1 year	India	Horse care
R3	45	12 years	Malaysia	Horse care
R4	44	4 years	Malaysia	Horse care
R5	47	21 years	Not recorded	General construction
R6	36	16 years	India	General construction
R7	43	3 years	India	Horse care

For this exploratory, qualitative study, a sample of seven was deemed adequate. In exploratory thematic analysis, the small number of samples is typical when it is intended to produce a rich, detailed understanding of a phenomenon in a bounded context where it is not intended to produce statistically representative or generalisable findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.2.1. Recruitment and Selection

The researcher used convenience sampling to recruit participants, drawing on existing access to two work sites. Horse care workers were recruited at a horse-riding establishment where the researcher regularly rides. This resulted in pre-existing familiarity and access to staff at that facility. Construction workers were recruited at a construction site located near the researcher's residence.

No recruitment agency or third-party intermediary was used for participant selection. Participants in the study had to meet the inclusion criteria (see Section 5.1, Limitation 2), which included: Low-wage migrant worker and currently working under a Work Permit on one of the two sites; Functional English proficiency to complete the interview. The exclusion criteria were none other than availability and willingness to participate at data collection time.

2.3. Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview schedule, designed to discuss participants' experiences of language barriers, contractual agreements and wages, was used to collect data. The 16 core questions related to an individual's background (age, tenure, occupation, recruitment pathway), contractual understanding, difficulty communicating in English at work, grievance behaviour, perceived legal protection, understanding of payslips, and willingness to accept language-related support (employer-provided English training, shared common language). Where the primary response to a question supplied sufficient information for an additional line of inquiry in regard to the question, a few respondents were asked supplemental probe questions to obtain a more detailed and quality response.

The sample's longest tenured respondent (R5) received a follow-on probing question: "You've been here 21 years, has the dormitory/living condition improved over that time?" because it is only within this sample that long-time respondents could see a structural change over time in the respondents' housing situation. R6 was also probed: "Did your supervisor form an impression of you based on where you're from or how you speak?", after the supervisors' earlier report of multilingual coping strategies at work, to further investigate the potential of language-based bias in supervisor relationships.

R4, who reported the use of active coping strategies in response to experiencing communication difficulty, was also

asked an additional exploratory question: "What strategies do you use when you can't understand somebody?", to elicit specific detail as opposed to a yes or no answer. This judgement probing did not always yield the same schedule of questions among respondents, this is discussed in greater detail in Section 5.1.

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted in person, in English and lasted for 1 week. Voice memo was used to record each interview. The recording only took place after the participant had given consent for it. The audio recordings enabled accurate transcription and analysis of the participant responses, as well as reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation due to note taking. All interviews, as well as the thematic coding, were done by a single researcher (the author), and no second coder or formal inter-rater reliability check was used.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, several ethical considerations were observed to protect the participants. Before the beginning of each interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Consent was asked separately for audio recording, and interviews were recorded only if this consent was confirmed. There was no collection or storage of personally identifying information. No information was collected on participants' names, specific workplace locations or identifying information. Additionally, permission was sought from the organisations before proceeding with the interviews. This study was not formally reviewed by an institutional ethics board, but ethical oversight was provided through obtaining permission from both worksites at the company level before contacting any participants, as well as the individual-level safeguards identified above (informed consent, separate consent for recording, anonymization and the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions).

2.6. Data Analysis

Transcripts of interviews were read several times before coding to get to know the entire set of interviews before assigning individual codes. Codes were inductively generated from the data, not based on an existing coding system, and applied uniformly across transcripts by checking each new coding decision against the coding decisions made for similar and/or previous transcripts. The ten general themes in Table 2 were then created by clustering codes that shared similar underlying patterns. The process of analysis broadly followed the reflexive thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), but was analysed by one researcher, without a second coder (see Limitation 7 in Section 5.1).

3. Results

Table 2. Shows the thematic analysis of interview responses (n = 7)

Theme	Codes	Respondent %	Description of Theme
Language Proficiency	Limited spoken/written English	71% (5/7)	Captures workers' self-assessed English ability, ranging from functional-but-weak to very limited, with reading consistently reported as harder than speaking
	Improved over time	29% (2/7)	Reflects that language proficiency is not static — workers report gradual improvement through prolonged exposure to the work environment.
	Multilingual coping	29% (2/7)	Some workers draw on multiple languages (not just English) to navigate the workplace.
Contract Comprehension	Signed without understanding	57% (4/7)	Highlights a recurring gap between signing a contract and actually comprehending its terms, especially for first-time arrivals
	No formal contract at all	29% (2/7)	Some workers report never having signed any contract, relying instead on informal or verbal arrangements.
	Contract fully understood	14% (1/7)	A minority of workers, often those recruited through structured training pathways, report full comprehension at signing.
Communication Difficulty on the Job	Harder to communicate with clients/riders	57% (4/7)	Language gaps are most acutely felt in interactions with employers or clients (e.g., horse riders), less so with fellow migrant coworkers.
	Coping strategies used	14% (1/7)	Workers describe active strategies (repetition requests, best-effort interpretation) to bridge communication gaps.
Grievance Behavior / Non-Complaint Norm	Silence as the default response	71% (5/7)	A strong, consistent pattern across respondents of not raising complaints to employers, regardless of tenure or English ability
	Small issues handled informally	14% (1/7)	Where complaints do occur, they are absorbed informally through supervisors rather than formal channels.
Perceived Safety & Legal Protection	Feels protected by Singapore's laws	57% (4/7)	Workers broadly report feeling protected, but this coexists with limited actual knowledge of specific labor rights.
	Working conditions rated safe	100% (7/7)	Universal agreement across all seven respondents that physical working conditions are safe
Payslip Comprehension	Payslip understood easily	57% (4/4 asked; R2, R4, R7 not asked)	Despite broader language barriers, payslips are uniformly described as simple and comprehensible, suggesting format/simplicity mitigates the language gap here.
	Peer comprehension estimate	14% (1/7)	One respondent extends their own comprehension to an estimate of peers' understanding, suggesting this is a shared experience rather than an individual one.
Desire for a Common Language	Explicitly wants shared language	42% (3/7)	A recurring, spontaneous suggestion that a shared lingua franca across worker nationalities would ease daily friction
	Sees language as a non-issue	14% (1/7)	Contrasts with the majority view — one respondent with the longest local language repertoire (English/Tamil/Chinese) reports no friction
Desire for Employer-Provided English Training	Would find lessons helpful	29% (2/2 asked; R1–R5 not asked)	Unanimous support across all respondents for employer-sponsored English classes — the most consistent finding in the dataset
Recruitment Pathway	Agency-based recruitment	42% (3/7)	Formal agency channels remain a common entry point, though often associated with lower contract comprehension.
	Informal/personal network recruitment	29% (2/7)	Personal and family networks serve as an alternative, informal recruitment channel.

	Skills-training pathway	14% (1/7)	A structured, formal training program feeds directly into higher contract comprehension and formal documentation.
Housing & Living Conditions	Employer-provided, restricted mobility	14% (1/7)	Housing is tied to the employer, with limited worker autonomy over living arrangements.
	Slow improvement over long tenure	14% (1/7)	Even after 21 years, housing conditions are described as only marginally improved.

Note. Percentages based on the total number (n = 7). There are two codes for which not all respondents were asked the corresponding question: "Payslip understood easily" (only 4 of 4 responded; R2, R4, and R7 were not asked); "Would find lessons helpful" (only 2 of 2 responded; R1–R5 were not asked). The two figures are therefore estimates of general agreement, not of the people sampled.

The first theme that arose was "Language Proficiency" which resulted in three codes: limited spoken English, improved over time, and multilingual coping. In this respect, R3 believed that "broken only can – read cannot." Another respondent, upon being asked about their experience, answered that "before coming here, I didn't understand. I learned after coming to Singapore" (R5). The second theme, "Contract Comprehension" was also related, and three codes emerged from it. The most prevalent of the three was to sign without comprehending. R2 admitted they "did not understand the permit, just signed." One of the respondents (R6) who had followed the formal training pathway reported full comprehension. This lack of understanding continued to affect the workplace, resulting in the third theme, "Communication Difficulty on the Job" and two codes.

The challenge was related to client/rider interaction in particular; R1 commented: "It's harder to communicate with the rider." Active coping strategies were described by one of the respondents, with R4 commenting, "sometimes ask them to repeat... others just try to understand and do what I can." Nevertheless, one theme that emerged was that "the Non-Compliant Norm" persisted, since the respondents hardly ever complained against their employers, even after they had been in Singapore for a long period of time. Silence was the default regardless of tenure, R7 said, "we don't really complain," and when they did complain, it was kept informal with R6 saying "small things are handled by the supervisor directly". Conversely, "Payslip Comprehension" was a relatively strong area; two codes were based on the four respondents who were actually queried. R3 said that it was "in English but very straightforward," with one of the respondents expanding on this to peers, estimating "maybe a maximum of 90% can understand it (R5)." Despite this, language was always a source of conflict for many, leading to the theme of "Desire for a Common Language" and two opposing codes developed. R3 said a shared language "will make my job so much easier," while R1, who has the largest existing language base, didn't see the problem: "I think it's no problem. I speak English, some Tamil, and some Chinese." Along with this, there was one code generated from the theme "Desire for Employer-Provided English Training" of which the 2 respondents who were specifically asked stated that it "would help to learn

English better" and "yes it would be very helpful" respectively; in such case, the desire to learn English better and comprehend payslip needs should be reported at lower sub-sample rates (29% and 57% respectively), not as findings shared by the whole sample. A second theme, "Recruitment Pathway" resulted in three codes arising, with agency-based recruitment being the most prominent, which was coded as R4, "found from agency", and an informal network pathway was represented with R7, "my brother-in-law already worked here before, so he recommended me". Finally, the theme "Housing & Living Conditions" led to two codes emerging, both from the sample's longest-tenured respondent; R5 described housing as employer-controlled, noting that "the company provides dormitories... if you want to live elsewhere, you need approval," with only "small improvements, but slow" after 21 years.

Of the ten themes, working conditions stood out as the one area every single respondent rated positively, and pay slip comprehension was moderately strong once corrected to the four respondents actually asked (57%). Comprehension of the contract, in turn, was closely linked to the recruitment route: respondents who came in via informal networks or structured training were more likely to have an understanding of the contract at the point of recruitment compared to those recruited via agencies, who were more likely to sign with no understanding of the contract.

A striking pattern was around complaints, with hardly anyone making any complaints to their employer, and this did not change even with respondents who have worked more than 10 years in Singapore, indicating that it was a behavioural norm and not something that just diminishes over time as English improves. Workers themselves most often identified language access as an area in need of improvement, not wages or housing. Housing, by contrast, appeared only in the voice of the sample's longest tenure respondent, who described an employer-controlled housing environment with only slow, limited improvement over a span of 21 years. Structural living conditions, therefore, may be less obvious but no less important, as an aspect of institutional dependency for those who have been working in Singapore for a long time.

4. Discussion

The three aims outlined in Section 1.5 are used to structure this discussion: (1) how language distance affects the understanding of workers' wage and contract conditions, (2) how language distance limits access to support systems and (3) how workers find ways to overcome this limitation. The following sections address these, starting with contract and wage comprehension, then grievance and support access, and finally to the coping strategies and language-related preferences workers themselves identified.

4.1. Recruitment Pathway and Contract Comprehension

Linguistic distance did not act as a uniform barrier across the sample, but rather as a multi-layered barrier that influenced workers' economic experiences differently according to their entry point into the system and the type of institutional contact they encountered (e.g. payslip, contract...). The most obvious correlation was the relationship between recruitment pathway and contractual understanding, with agency-recruited workers (the 57% of the sample) significantly more likely to sign contracts with no understanding of what they entailed, and people recruited from informal networks and structured training significantly more likely to understand the contract. This aligns with Rahman's (2006) description of Singapore's multi-tiered labour recruitment system, which results in the recruitment of different types of labour at different points and their subsequent placement in vastly different levels of institutional protection, and with Baey and Yeoh's (2018) observation that workers often arrive already indebted from prepaid recruitment fees, only to be placed into employment relationships that place them in a position of disempowerment before an agreement is reached, and prior to the terms of their employment being communicated. This is a bit different from Sweet et al. (2025), who conducted a systematic review of Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf states and found that structured pre-departure training (even if short) did not provide all workers with the information they needed, indicating that this form of structured training (R6) is not necessarily a safeguard across contexts, and that the outcome of this sample may be relatively positive. This pattern suggests that contract comprehension is not primarily a function of individual English ability, but of the institutional pathway through which a worker enters employment, meaning interventions aimed at improving comprehension may be more effective if targeted at the recruitment stage itself, rather than at general English proficiency after arrival.

4.2. Housing and Living Conditions

The sample's oldest respondent (R5) offered the following information under the Housing & Living Conditions theme, which is directly related to the above: Dormitory housing is employer controlled, with only slow, limited improvement over 21 years. This corresponds to Platt et al.'s (2016) description of dormitory-based housing as a way to limit workers' mobility, and to their findings that the amount of social interaction among workers is highly constrained,

mostly to co-ethnic peer groups. High-density and multi-occupancy housing have long been reported in Singapore's dormitory sector, as evidenced by the rapid COVID-19 spread in these units in 2020 (Yi et al., 2020). In the wake of these outbreaks in worker housing, the Ministry of Manpower introduced new regulations on mandatory standards for workers' dormitories in 2021, such as limiting the occupancy of workers' dorms and providing en-suite facilities (Mail, 2021). But R5, who has worked in Singapore for 21 years, said things have only improved "small improvements, but slow." This single case suggests that a policy change is not necessarily reflected in a difference in the life of the worker who is the subject of that change, although it is difficult to draw a conclusion beyond R5's case from this fact.

4.3. Payslip Versus Contract Comprehension

Comprehension of payslips was rather good among those who were actually asked (57%), and weak comprehension of contracts at signing (14%). Because pay slip comprehension was assessed for only four of seven respondents, selected by interviewer judgement rather than systematically, this finding should be treated as suggestive rather than directly comparable to themes assessed across the full sample, such as the non-complaint norm (71%, $n=7$). This reflects Chiswick and Miller's (2012) notion that language barriers do not impact all things in the same way. Simple, repetitive documents – such as payslips – are simpler to comprehend even when limited English, whereas dense, one-time documents – such as contracts – are much more difficult to comprehend. It also is consistent with Gupta's (2025) findings that workers with limited English proficiency have a critical deficit in understanding the terms of a contract, even when they believe that they are able to converse with others on a daily basis. This asymmetry suggests that the barrier is not linguistic distance in the abstract, but the interaction between linguistic distance and document format: repeated, simple documents allow workers to build comprehension through pattern recognition over time, while infrequent, dense documents offer no such opportunity, regardless of how long a worker has been in Singapore.

4.4. The Non-Complaint Norm as Structural, Not Linguistic

Perhaps the most striking finding, however, is the near-universal non-complaint norm (71%), which did not diminish with tenure or improved English, indicating this is likely a structural pattern rather than a purely linguistic one. This is well supported by the description of the Work Permit system by Platt et al. (2016), which has a structure that deters complaints because it makes it more difficult for a worker to complain against one employer because of their legal status with another employer. Wee, Goh and Yeoh (2018) also state that it is illegal to leave a job without notice to the employer, and that it is not a communication failure, but it is a rational survival strategy. The need for a common language (42%) and the need for training in English as part of the workplace (29%) indicate that language is the dimension identified by workers

as the dimension they can act upon. Similarly, the near-universal support for employer-provided English training was based on only two of seven respondents who were asked this question directly; while consistent with workers' broader expressions of desire for language support elsewhere in the sample, this specific figure should not be read as representing the full sample's view.

This is echoed by Ali, Prasatyo and Dharmawan (2025), who found that a proactive language strategy was related to a higher level of tolerance to workplace discrimination among Indonesian workers in Kuwait. This is also highlighted by Rubdy and McKay (2013), who argue that English is a social signal of skill level as well as a functional skill, meaning that a rise in English may not necessarily be enough to overcome the structural exclusion that has been found in the non-compliant theme, as workers could still be identified as low-skilled even when their proficiency increased.

4.5. Contribution of This Study

Put together, the results of Sections 4.1-4.4 suggest a common thread that has not been explicitly linked in previous research: recruitment pathway, contract understanding and grievance behaviour appear interwoven in a causal sequence as opposed to independent issues. Workers who enter through agency pathways are more likely to sign employment contracts without understanding them (4.1), which limits their awareness of their formal rights; combined with the structural design of the Work Permit system, this contributes to the near-universal reluctance to raise grievances, regardless of English proficiency (4.4). When recruitment precarity, contract comprehension, and grievance behaviour are investigated as separate phenomena, this study's results indicate that it is a sequential process of vulnerability, in which language is one of a number of factors, but not the root cause.

This study's approach also addresses a methodological gap in existing research on this topic. Existing systematic reviews of migrant worker language barriers (Sweet et al., 2025; Rast et al., 2025) draw conclusions from numerous studies, but are limited to examining language barriers at a general level (e.g., training effectiveness, healthcare access) rather than tracing how the same migrant worker sample experiences different aspects of language barriers across specific institutional touchpoints. This study's within-sample comparison, as opposed to a cross-sample synthesis, provides a picture of how language affects the same seven respondents across contract comprehension, payslip comprehension, grievance behaviour, and healthcare-relevant communication, within one consistent set of individual circumstances. This design feature is what makes the study's central finding possible to detect: that language barriers are unevenly distributed across institutional touchpoints for the same individuals, a pattern that between-study syntheses cannot capture, since they compare across different samples and contexts rather than within a single one.

4.6. Synthesis

All in all, these results indicate that language barriers in niche occupations in Singapore are not a simple issue, but multiple layers of issue. In some cases, repeated exposure can be enough to resolve them, such as getting accustomed to daily communication or reading pay slips. Some, however, cannot be corrected only through learning English, such as the Work Permit rules and the accommodation in dormitories, which binds the legal status and daily life of the workers to their employers and makes it difficult for them to voice their grievances.

5. Conclusion

The results reveal how language functions differently in various aspects of a worker's life: while functional and repeated interactions (e.g. reading a payslip) are managed with relative ease, dense, one-off institutional interactions (e.g. signing a contract) are a serious challenge. This is in line with Chiswick and Miller's (2012) explanation of linguistic distance as a barrier that is differential and not absolute. This difference is important because it shows that the language barrier itself is not a simple barrier but rather a complex arena of barriers, the severity of which varies depending on the format, frequency and institutional weight of the interaction in which the language barrier is encountered.

The significance of this study lies in its reframing of language as a structural issue rather than a purely linguistic deficit. The very common non-compliant norm observed throughout the sample, which did not diminish over time, regardless of how long workers had been in the job or their level of English, is the strongest indication for this reframing: if language proficiency alone explained this sample's reluctance to raise grievances, this pattern would be expected to weaken over the years as workers' English improved. Rather, silence is a rational response to the structural conditions of the Work Permit system, which entails a worker's legal status being dependent on a single employer (Platt et al., 2016), and not a failure to communicate that can be overcome by language training.

There are two key results of this finding. First, for researchers, this study's findings suggest the importance of not just taking language as a byproduct of the background noise in a study, and to also consider language as a lens through which to understand how migrant workers experience the systems they operate within. Going forward, it is important to continue breaking down the "language barrier" into individual points of institutional contact instead of as one, to be able to identify and understand the specific interaction points. Second, in terms of policy and practice, the findings suggest that interventions focused solely on improving workers' English proficiency, while valuable and explicitly requested by respondents themselves, are unlikely to be sufficient to address the structural vulnerabilities noted here, such as those related to comprehending contracts and grievance behaviour.

Better language support is not enough, improvements in the way recruitment is carried out and the process of dealing with complaints will likely be necessary, as well as, not in lieu of, meaningful change.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

1. Sector Scope: The present study was carried out among migrant workers from only two specific sectors and under only two specific companies, restricting the generalisability of findings to the low-wage migrant workforce in Singapore as a whole, which works in a wider range of sectors (e.g., marine, domestic work).
2. Language of Interview: No interpreters or translators were used during any interviews. This may have created a selection bias with regard to the language level of the respondents, since those with the most severe problems with functional use of English may have been under-represented or even not included in the sample (those with the most severe problems being the population most impacted by the problems explored in this study). This is a particularly relevant constraint for a study centred on language barriers, since it means the sample likely underrepresents the very population whose experiences the study aims to capture.
3. Non-uniform question coverage: Not every question was asked of each respondent; some questions were only asked of those the interviewer judged, in the moment, to be able to answer them (e.g., four of seven respondents were asked about payslip comprehension). Although this method of judgment may have prevented the respondents from being asked questions at which they were ill-equipped to respond, it also meant that the choice of questions was not systematic and randomised, creating a potential interviewer-driven selection bias. Several of the theme-level percentages are based on smaller, non-randomly selected sub-samples, limiting comparisons across themes and the representativeness of the sub-sample percentages.
4. Sample size: The number of respondents (7) is suitable for a qualitative exploratory thematic analysis, but does not enable the findings to be broken down to finer levels of nationality, contract type or length of tenure. With this sample size, the results presented here are not statistically generalisable, but rather indicative and hypothesis-generating, and readers should consider their transferability to the full Singaporean migrant worker population in the light of the contextual detail provided in this paper, rather than assuming it.
5. Self-reported information: The research was based on self-reported perceptions of contract understanding, safety and communication in the workplace, and did not independently verify these perceptions with contracts, payslips or employer records, so there is a potential for social desirability bias, especially in relation to sensitive issues like grievance behaviour. This is particularly relevant to the non-complaint norm finding (Section 4.4),

where social desirability bias could plausibly lead respondents to underreport dissatisfaction with their employer, regardless of the study's confidentiality safeguards.

6. Singapore-specific context: This study is limited to Singapore's context, and findings may not be transferable to migrants working under other legal and institutional frameworks in other countries.
7. Single-coder analysis: A second coder or formal inter-rater reliability check would enhance confidence in the thematic categories in future research; coding was not done by a second coder or a reliability check. This is particularly relevant to themes with limited supporting evidence, such as Housing & Living Conditions, which is drawn entirely from a single respondent's account and would benefit most from independent verification of coding in future research.

5.2. Future Recommendations

1. Future research should include a larger sample of workers from more occupations and companies to see if the observed trends in this study (including the relationship between pathway and contract understanding) are found among other migrant workers in Singapore.
2. Future research should also include professional interpreters or multilingual research assistants to enable workers with less English proficiency to be included, as well as minimize selection bias from English-only data collection.
3. Future studies should use a standardised interview schedule where each theme is covered with each respondent, rather than the sub-sample size differences found across themes in this study, which reduced the level of comparability.
4. Future research could use a longitudinal design that involves interviewing workers over their first year in the job to directly test the hypothesis that the comprehension of contracts and complaint behaviour and language proficiencies improve with job tenure, instead of testing this relationship cross-sectionally as done in this study.
5. Since comprehension of contracts was the area found to be the weakest in this study, a requirement that employment contracts be presented to migrant workers in their native language may be needed, or employment contracts may be subject to an independent, non-employer related translator before they are signed.
6. As it is known that a large majority of migrant workers desire to learn English, the government may wish to consider supporting or incentivising a structured and continuous English language training programme for migrant workers, in addition to the on-the-job informal training.
7. Policymakers should also look at improving mechanisms to express grievances independent of the employment relationship since the non-compliant norm was associated with the structural design of the Work Permit system, and

not solely based on language skills, which would mean that workers would have to balance a complaint against the possibility of deportation.

8. Based on the evidence of employer-controlled housing and the lack of improvement over time, policymakers should contemplate more stringent enforcement and monitoring of the standards of the dormitory housing, as well as regular reporting by policymakers to workers

about compliance with the standards, in order to make policy changes more meaningful for the long-term residents of the workforce.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. Before we begin, I want to make sure you know that everything you share is completely confidential. I won't use your name anywhere, and you can stop or skip any question at any time. Does that sound okay? In case you want me to repeat/don't understand a question - please ask me to say it again/break it down. It will be audio recorded.”

Q1. To help me understand your situation better, could you tell me a little about yourself — how old are you, where you're from, how long you've been in Singapore, and what kind of work you do here?

Q2. How did you find out about this job in Singapore? Who helped you get it? (Probes: Was there a recruitment agency involved? Did you pay any fees? Did anyone explain the job conditions before you came?)

Q3: Did you sign a contract before starting? What language was it in, and did you fully understand it before signing? Looking back, were there things — duties, pay, leave — that turned out to be different from what you expected?

Q4. How comfortable are you speaking or reading English or Mandarin? Did that affect how much you understood about the job before you took it?

Q5. Have you ever felt that because of language, your employer or others treated you differently — or that you had less power to negotiate or push back? (Probes: Can you give me an example of a situation where this happened? How did you respond at that moment?)

Q6: What strategies have you developed to manage when you don't understand something important at work or in a document? Do you ever feel pressure to present yourself differently — to seem more competent or less foreign — to be taken seriously?

Q7: When you first met your employer or supervisor, do you feel they formed an impression of you based on where you're from or how you speak? Have you ever been assumed to be good or bad at something just because of your background, for example, being physically strong, obedient, or good with animals? How did that shape your work, your pay, or your workload?

Q8. Are there certain types of tasks or roles that workers from your country or ethnic group tend to get — or tend to be excluded from — in your workplace? Why do you think that is? And do you think language plays a role in that? (Probes: Is it about language, or do you think it goes beyond language — assumptions about ability, intelligence, physical strength, or "fit"? Has that affected what you earn, since some roles pay more than others? Have you ever been given — or denied — a task specifically because of your background?)

Q9. Can you walk me through how your pay works — how much you earn, when you get paid, and whether anything is deducted? (Probes: Are the deductions the same every month, or do they change? Do you receive pay slips or any written record? Has your pay ever been late or short? What did you do?)

Q10. When you look at your pay slip or the numbers your employer gives you, can you usually understand everything on it? If not, what do you do? (Probes: Is it in English? Do you need help reading it? Have you ever disagreed with a deduction but not said anything because of the language?)

Q11: Have you ever felt your wages were unfair or different from what was agreed — or has your employer changed your duties, pay, or conditions without warning? What did you do, or what stopped you from acting?

Q12. Are there situations where you chose NOT to complain or seek help, even though you felt something was wrong? What held you back? (Probes: Fear of employer, work permit, community gossip? Did language play a role — not knowing how to explain things, or not trusting you'd be understood?)

Q13. Do you feel that the rules and protections in Singapore cover workers like you — in your type of job? Why or why not?

Q14. If you could change one thing about how Singapore supports workers like you — especially around language — what would it be?

Q15. Do you know anyone else who is a migrant worker in a similar situation — not in construction or domestic work — who might be willing to speak with me? I would be very grateful if you could ask them.