

An Exploration of Intercultural Challenges of Chinese Students studying abroad—— A Case Study of Postgraduate Students’ Experience at one University in the UK

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Abstract:

This research examines the cross-cultural difficulties encountered by first-year Chinese postgraduates at a university in the UK within the context of educational globalization. The swift growth of international student mobility, especially the substantial population of Chinese students studying overseas, necessitates a deeper comprehension of their intercultural issues. The study concentrates on three primary domains: educational norms, linguistic obstacles, and cultural disorientation. The transition from China’s lecture-centric educational model to the UK’s interactive and discussion-driven methodology is difficult. Language difficulties significantly affect students. This study examines the intercultural difficulties encountered by first-year Chinese graduate students at a university in the UK within the context of educational globalization. The swift growth of international student mobility, especially the substantial population of Chinese students studying overseas, necessitates a deeper comprehension of the student’s academic experiences. Cultural shocks necessitate that students acclimate to unfamiliar cultural settings, presenting both cognitive and emotional challenges. The research used a qualitative technique, doing in-depth interviews with Chinese graduate students to provide insights into their experiences. The results underscore the necessity for support mechanisms, such as language instruction, orientation initiatives, and mentorship, to assist students in overcoming the difficulties of an unfamiliar educational setting. The research finds that educational institutions must implement a comprehensive strategy to help international students by addressing academic, language, and cultural problems. By doing so, they may augment the educational sustainability of overseas students, facilitating their personal development and academic success. The research indicates that further studies should persist in examining the dynamic

realm of educational globalization and the varied requirements of overseas students to guarantee their complete engagement in and advantage of the global educational experience.

Keywords: Intercultural Challenges; Postgraduate Student; Study in the UK; Case Study.

1. Introduction

The extent and complexity of educational globalization have increased and deepened at an unprecedented rate over the past decade, driven by economic, social, and cultural globalization and localization. This tendency enhances interactions and collaboration among diverse cultures while offering foreign students increased possibilities to learn about and experience other nations' cultures and educational systems. Currently, individuals have experienced educational globalization, which eliminates barriers between diverse cultures and renders various features of each culture reasonably recognizable to others. The internationalization of universities has gradually emerged as a significant trend in education. Annually, over 500,000 Chinese students opt to pursue their education overseas, enrolling in universities and graduate institutions globally, therefore benefiting from a diverse international educational experience. Zhu and Sullivan [1] assert that China is the principal origin of British students. The quantity of Chinese students pursuing education abroad significantly surpasses any other country, establishing them as the predominant group of foreign students in the UK.

In the context of educational globalization, adapting to the variety of higher education is tough owing to the varied cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as the distinct learning and life experiences of foreign students. The phrase "intercultural challenge" denotes the various difficulties faced by international students, encompassing general life adaptation, academic obstacles, and acclimatization to the host nation's educational and cultural frameworks [2]. The cross-cultural adaptation of foreign students is a significant worldwide concern since the continuous trend of globalization and the internationalization of education may influence the long-term academic achievement of these students. This dilemma not only poses current challenges but also growing concerns, affecting both the personal conduct and academic achievement of these kids. Cross-cultural learning research is important to researchers, colleges, and universities in mitigating cross-cultural learning hurdles, enhancing education, and

advancing students' sustainable learning.

Research on intercultural obstacles in many contexts indicates that Chinese students studying in the UK are likely to encounter multiple trans-cultural difficulties, including educational traditions, language hurdles, and cultural differences [3]. Initially, Chinese students in the UK may need to acclimate to novel pedagogical approaches and methodologies, including academic writing, research procedures, and test forms, which can impose considerable learning strain and hurdles. Secondly, owing to the linguistic and cultural disparities between China and Britain, intercultural students must acclimate to the new linguistic environment, encompassing spoken language, written language, colloquialisms, etc. Moreover, substantial cultural disparities exist between China and Britain, including beliefs, lifestyles, social etiquette, and more. In the contemporary cultural milieu, international students must honor local customs and acclimate to the new lifestyle, which may induce culture shock and provide challenges in adaption. They require a specific duration and effort to surmount these trans-cultural obstacles.

Further inquiry and contemplation of the Chinese first-year graduate students at a certain university is necessary. This paper will conduct a comprehensive analysis of the cross-cultural obstacles faced by this set of students during trans-cultural study and address the following two research topics to bridge the gaps in existing research. What are the cross-cultural obstacles faced by first-year Chinese graduate students at the university? 2. What strategies could first-year Chinese graduate students in the UK employ to navigate intercultural challenges? This research delineates the subject of investigation as Chinese graduate students at a UK university and examines the problems they face in cross-cultural learning, given that these students had prior social experience and cross-cultural communication abilities. The complexity of the courses they undertake, the academic demands, and the subjects they choose to pursue significantly differ from those of college students and undergraduates. Consequently, the research population of this study diverges from that of other higher

education students, enhancing the comprehension of the cross-cultural obstacles faced by graduate students in the UK. The study provides recommendations to surmount these obstacles, facilitating navigation through academic, social, and cultural contexts, so augmenting their prospective contributions upon returning to China.

2. Literature Review

Zhu et al. investigated the disparities in classroom culture between China and Britain, highlighting that Chinese students exhibit poor involvement in British classrooms [4]. This reticent demeanor may be a challenge to instructors who are used to a highly interactive setting and may hinder students' incorporation into the classroom. This research employed qualitative methodology under the phenomenological framework, conducting comprehensive interviews with seasoned British educators and Chinese pupils. The study examined the current literature to investigate the origins of cross-cultural problems, nonverbal behaviors, and inventive tactics employed by Chinese students in the classroom. They demonstrated that Chinese students may encounter intercultural problems, including language hurdles, cultural disparities, and variations in pedagogical approaches when studying in the UK. These obstacles result in the diminished engagement of Chinese students in the classroom. Ultimately, it offers evidence-based, innovative ideas for practitioners in British higher education. In 2022, Su utilized ethnography as a study approach and conducted interviews with four Chinese EAL pupils in a private school in London. The objective was to get a comprehensive knowledge of the cultural, linguistic, and academic adaption obstacles encountered by students who had previously undertaken the Chinese college admission exams prior to enrolling in British colleges [5]. The study asserts that while participants held optimistic anticipations regarding British education prior to their arrival in the UK as a pathway to success, they faced considerable obstacles: specifically, the inability to forge friendships with local students, challenges in mastering fundamental subjects, and issues arising from cultural, linguistic, and academic factors. Despite the school's provision of English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes to enhance the English ability of Chinese college students, all four students express concern that these courses do not adequately address their linguistic requirements. Su [5] proposes that educational institutions enhance cross-cultural communication and comprehension by advancing language and cultural awareness to assist young foreign students in their academic transition.

Tao employed a qualitative research methodology in 2022 to investigate how Chinese students perceive themselves

as global citizens and to analyze the cross-cultural challenges and specific skills they acquire while studying in the UK. This involved administering questionnaires and conducting in-depth interviews with 19 graduate students at the commencement, midpoint, and conclusion of their postgraduate programs from September 2019 to July 2020 [6]. This study's findings, grounded in transformational learning theory, indicate that international education enhances students' global perspective, comprehension of global issues, and capacity to navigate cross-cultural obstacles. This study's suggestions will empower policymakers and educators to enhance global educational practices and support for foreign students. This study's research gap is restricted to analyzing the behavior and experiences of graduate students in China during the COVID-19 outbreak. At this moment, there exists a discrepancy among Chinese graduate students studying in the UK, and the study sample is excessively broad, encompassing several institutions.

Recognizing the cross-cultural challenges encountered by international students when using a second language in a novel cultural environment, Liu examined how five Chinese students cultivated cross-cultural identity during their year of study in the UK and how second foreign language pragmatics correlates with the enhancement of cross-cultural awareness through interviews and a study diary in 2022 [7]. This study reveals that Chinese students frequently recognize the disparity between their pragmatic understanding of a second language (L2) and the learning processes employed by native English speakers. The utilization of a second foreign language by learners is affected by identity-related issues. Exposure to novel L2 pragmatic elements might prompt learners to contemplate the socio-cultural significances inherent in various pragmatic forms, potentially aiding in the resolution of identity conflicts and cross-cultural obstacles. This study offers a distinctive contribution to the field of second language pragmatics, viewing overseas students as individuals with whole development. The existing research gap is that Liu's [7] study is confined to undergraduate students in the UK, without analysis and interviews pertaining to graduate students. Cheng and Adekola [8] examined how Chinese master's students at British institutions perceive the demanding and helpful aspects of their learning environment via the lens of kindness. This research employed snowball sampling and conducted interviews with 63 Chinese students at a British institution to investigate cross-cultural interactions and experiences regarding faculty, instructional materials, feedback, and support. Goodwill strategies improved Chinese students' academic and social integration in the UK.

3. Research Methodology

Li [9] assumes that several research methodologies are essential in educational research. Quantitative, qualitative, and hybrid methodologies are all significant. Qualitative research is fundamentally grounded on the phenomenological or interpretive paradigm. In this research methodology, the investigator immerses oneself in a natural setting and actively interacts with participants to elucidate their viewpoints and perceptions. The research uses qualitative methodologies to discern the phenomena and processes influencing these viewpoints using diverse procedures, such as interviews and questionnaires [10].

The study performed comprehensive interviews with four Chinese graduate students at the University utilizing a semi-structured interview approach. These graduate students possess three distinct characteristics:

1. They possessed strong English literacy during their undergraduate studies and concentrated on English disciplines such as translation.
2. Prior to studying in the UK, they had not experienced residing or studying in a nation where English is the native language.
3. Throughout their undergraduate education, students did not encounter pedagogical approaches comparable to those of the example university.

Semi-structured interviews provide freedom while preserving structure, enabling respondents to articulate their thoughts and concerns in their own language. According to Brinkmann [11], a semi-structured interview does not imply a lack of organization. It requires careful preparation and consideration by researchers on how to actively participate in interviews, avoid discussions filled with social science jargon, and promote polite expression of varied viewpoints by interviewees. Semi-structured interviews enable participants to be involved, proactive, and aggressive in articulating their perspectives, which corresponds with the particular objectives of this study.

4. Discussion

4.1 Different Educational Conventions

The teaching method of undergraduate students in China is quite different from that of the case university in the UK. When learners are exposed to a new learning environment, they will have negative emotions, such as anxiety, unhappiness, and loss, accompanied by learning shock. In the face of unfamiliar teaching methods, international students may have deeper psychological and learning pressure and even a lack of self-confidence [12]. For example:

“What annoys me the most is my university’s teaching method because when I was an undergraduate in China, the class was conducted in the form of lectures. As a student, I just need to listen carefully in class and take notes if necessary. Then, I would take a standardized examination at the end of the semester. However, when I first arrived here, I found that I had discussion classes such as tutorials and seminars that needed more participation because I had to discuss with my classmates and express my views. At the same time, I had to communicate with my mentors, which made me unaccustomed. Sometimes, I am ashamed to speak in this kind of course because my spoken English is not very good.” (Student 3)

The situation of Student 3 exemplifies the challenge posed by the heightened expectations for engagement and communication inside the classroom. The transition from a passive learning environment, characterised by listening and note-taking, to an active one, where students are required to participate in conversations and articulate their opinions, may be daunting. Language difficulties exacerbate this issue since the students’ self-consciousness over their spoken English skills hinders their capacity to engage fully in class conversations.

The discussion sessions, including tutorials and seminars prevalent at the University, aim to cultivate critical thinking and autonomous learning. Nonetheless, for students familiar with a more prescriptive pedagogical approach, these lectures may induce stress.

The requirement to engage with peers and mentors necessitates a degree of confidence and linguistic skill that overseas students may lack initially. Furthermore, the standardised test system in China offers a definitive framework and evaluation standards for pupils, which may be reassuring in its consistency. Conversely, the UK system frequently employs ongoing evaluation via coursework, presentations, and participation, which may be more unclear and, hence, more anxiety-provoking for students unaccustomed to this methodology.

It is essential to acknowledge the significance of self-confidence in the learning process. The absence of self-confidence, as noted by Student 3, can be a considerable obstacle to academic achievement. This may be intensified by the apprehension of erring in the presence of classmates and teachers, a prevalent anxiety among students for whom English is not the first language.

In summary, the examination of various educational customs underscores the necessity for support structures to assist overseas students in overcoming the problems of an unfamiliar learning environment. This may encompass language training, orientation programs that acclimatize students to the UK educational system, and mentorship initiatives that offer personalized assistance and support.

Moreover, cultivating a classroom culture that promotes engagement and appreciates varied viewpoints helps mitigate the stress and apprehension linked to the shift toward a more interactive educational setting. The subsequent studies might investigate the efficacy of these support systems and their customization to address the distinct requirements of international students.

4.2 Language Barriers

Almost all of the respondents said they found that teachers at the University did not have the standard British pronunciation as they thought. On the contrary, many teachers came from all over the world and had various accents. They must adapt to the way every teacher with an accent speaks. For example:

“After I entered into my university, I found that my teacher’s accent was much more serious than my Chinglish pronunciation. One of my teachers is from Spain and speaks very fast with a strong accent. She flicks her tongue when she speaks English, which makes it difficult for me to understand her lessons. Although she will re-explain the main points of the course and slow down when she sees that we need clarification, the course will be easier to understand if I can adapt to her accent.” (Student 2)

Chinese graduate students studying in the UK should adapt to their teachers’ accents and improve their listening and speaking skills to ensure regular communication with teachers and classmates [18]. For example:

“My spoken IELTS score is only 5.5, and my listening score is only 6. When I first came to the University, I couldn’t understand what my teachers and classmates said. I always felt that I was far behind others, which made me feel frustrated.” Fortunately, I attended the pre-session English class. After studying in the language environment of pure English communication for a month, I found that my spoken English and listening have improved. I can understand what the teacher is saying. I can also have some simple conversations with native people.” (Student 1)

The analysis’s outcomes reveal that the variety of lecturers’ accents at the institution poses a considerable obstacle for Chinese graduate students studying in the UK. The anticipated conventional British pronunciation is not fulfilled, as the academic personnel consists of persons from many international backgrounds, each with distinct accents. This variety enhances the teaching environment but requires students to acclimatise to various accents, posing significant challenges for non-native English speakers.

The experience of Student 2 highlights the challenge of understanding an instructor with a pronounced and unusual accent, particularly when the delivery is swift. The teacher’s Spanish heritage and distinctive quick,

tongue-flicking speaking technique impede comprehension. Notwithstanding the teacher’s attempts to clarify and decelerate as necessary, the student’s comprehension of the course material is dependent on their acclimatisation to the accent. This underscores the significance of accent accommodation in education and indicates that students might gain from measures to improve their listening comprehension abilities.

Furthermore, Student 1’s situation exemplifies the overarching concern of language competency among Chinese graduate students. The student, possessing an IELTS speaking score of 5.5 and a listening score of 6, initially has difficulties comprehending both instructors and peers. This challenge impacts academic achievement and has psychological consequences, resulting in emotions of dissatisfaction and a sense of being marginalised. The student’s engagement in a pre-session English course, which placed them in an exclusive English communication setting, led to significant enhancements in both spoken English and listening proficiency. This case highlights the importance of specialised language assistance for overseas students.

The examination of these facts yields numerous salient aspects. Initially, it is clear that the diversity of dialects among teaching professionals might present both advantages and disadvantages. Although it enhances cultural and educational experiences, it also poses a considerable challenge for pupils unacquainted with diverse English dialects. Enhancing listening and speaking abilities is essential for efficient communication and academic achievement. This indicates that institutions ought to provide more extensive language assistance programs tailored to the particular requirements of overseas students. Moreover, the significance of pre-session English lessons should not be overlooked. They facilitate the transfer of students into an academic setting where English is the predominant language of communication. These programs can be especially effective in fostering confidence and proficiency in language skills essential for academic participation.

In summary, the discourse underscores the necessity of equipping foreign students with the language variety they would face in a global academic environment. It underscores the necessity for colleges to offer sufficient support to assist students in acclimating to various dialects and enhancing their English ability. Future studies may investigate the most efficacious ways for accent accommodation and language proficiency development, along with the enduring effects of such support on the academic and social integration of overseas students. Furthermore, investigating methods for universities to enhance the integration of language support services within the overall educational

framework would be advantageous to guarantee that all students, irrespective of their linguistic background, may excel in their academic endeavours.

4.3 Cultural Shocks

Due to the different history between China and Britain, there are also significant cultural differences between the two countries. Chinese students attending graduate school at the University are bound to encounter the cross-cultural challenge of culture shock. For different international students, the impact of culture shock on them is different, such as:

“About culture shock, the first thing that comes to mind is personal privacy because China is a conservative and introverted country. On the contrary, Britain is an open country. When I first came to the UK, many people would first ask my name, contact information, and age when they met me for the first time, which shocked me because these acts would be considered harassment in Chinese culture and an invasion of privacy. Nevertheless, it is a normal way to make friends in the UK, and I must get used to it.” (Student 4)

“Through my three-month contact with British locals, I found that British culture is relatively free. On the street, I often see my classmates participate in or organize parades. However, when I was an undergraduate, Chinese universities explicitly forbade students from taking part in these activities. At first, I was so scared that I told my British friend not to participate in the parade because it was hazardous. My friend was confused and even angry at my remarks. I have adapted to the British parade culture and have not objected.” (Student 2)

The examination of these events culminates in numerous salient aspects. Initially, it is clear that culture shock is a multifaceted and personal experience, with many cultural elements affecting pupils in distinct manners. Secondly, the process of acclimatising to a new culture entails not just cognitive comprehension but also emotional assimilation of cultural standards that may significantly differ from one’s own. Furthermore, the situations illustrated indicate that cultural adaptation is reciprocal. It is essential for foreign students to acclimatise to the cultural environment of their host country, while concurrently, the host community must recognise and be attuned to the cultural backgrounds of these students. This reciprocal comprehension may cultivate a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere for everyone.

In conclusion, the discourse underscores the significance of cultural awareness and flexibility for Chinese students in a foreign academic setting, such as the case institution. It underscores the necessity for educational institutions

to offer cultural orientation programs that assist overseas students in comprehending and acclimating to the cultural norms of their host country. Moreover, data indicates that cultivating an atmosphere of cultural interchange and reciprocal respect may significantly improve the entire experience of international students, enabling them to excel both academically and socially. Future studies may investigate the enduring impacts of culture shock, the effectiveness of diverse cultural adaptation measures, and the contribution of host communities in facilitating the integration of foreign students.

5. Conclusion

The rising trend of educational globalization has profoundly influenced the higher education environment, especially for Chinese graduate students pursuing studies overseas. This research offers a thorough examination of the cross-cultural hurdles encountered by first-year Chinese graduate students at the institution, emphasizing educational norms, linguistic obstacles, and cultural shocks. The findings highlight the necessity of comprehending and tackling these issues to guarantee the successful academic and social integration of international students.

Adjusting to changing educational paradigms, particularly the transition from lecture-centric to discussion-based classrooms, has been recognized as a considerable challenge for several students. The changeover necessitates an alteration in learning methodologies and the enhancement of confidence and communication abilities. Support services, like as orientation programs and mentorship, are essential for assisting students in adapting to these changes and improving their academic experience. Language difficulties, particularly the variety of accents among educators, have been identified as a significant obstacle. The necessity for enhanced listening and speaking abilities is critical, and the significance of pre-sessional English courses in addressing this deficiency is undeniable. Universities must provide extensive language assistance programs customized to the distinct requirements of overseas students to enhance their academic achievement. Significant obstacles have been discovered due to cultural shocks arising from differing values of personal privacy and freedom of expression. Adapting to a new cultural milieu needs both cognitive comprehension and emotional acceptance of cultural standards that may differ from one’s own. Educational institutions must provide cultural orientation programs and cultivate an atmosphere of cultural interchange and mutual respect to facilitate the integration of international students.

This study has shown the complex cross-cultural obstacles encountered by Chinese graduate students in the UK. It

has underscored the necessity for a comprehensive strategy to assist these pupils, including academic, linguistic, and cultural dimensions. By tackling these obstacles, educational institutions may improve the learning sustainability of foreign students, therefore fostering their personal development and academic success. The findings from this research can guide the formulation of specific support initiatives and enhance the current dialogue on the internationalization of higher education. Subsequent research must persist in examining the dynamic realm of educational globalization and the varied requirements of overseas pupils to guarantee their complete engagement in and advantage of the worldwide educational experience.

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