

Beyond Stereotypes: Exploring international Chinese students' experiences of interaction with learning contents in higher education within the networked learning environment

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Abstract

The Chinese government provided a narrow window for Chinese students during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, enabling them to remain in China and enrol in online courses provided by foreign universities. This was not authorised before the pandemic (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2020). As a result, there was limited research focusing on Chinese overseas students' distance learning experiences before the pandemic (e.g., Kung, 2017). Furthermore, these studies have been criticised for their overuse of monolithic approaches and the underuse of theories, producing stereotypes and misunderstandings about Chinese students (Lee & Bligh, 2019; Xu, 2022). Despite the increasing number of studies on Chinese overseas students conducted during the pandemic, their online learning experiences have been significantly influenced by the unique situation, which may not be applicable in a post-pandemic scenario. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to investigate Chinese overseas students' networked learning experiences in the post-pandemic era.

Building on the ongoing conceptualising effort (NLEC, 2021a), the authors have used learner-content interaction (Moore, 1989) and Berry's acculturation theory (Berry, 2005) to explore online international Chinese students' experiences of interaction with learning contents. The focus is on developing a holistic and balanced perspective of these students. Twelve students, enrolled in online graduate degree programmes offered by Western universities while residing in China, were recruited and interviewed. The results of the authors' thematic analysis of the interview transcripts suggest that online Chinese international students are active agents in their interaction with the learning content and their adaptation to the new settings, in which they bridge a strong connection between Chinese and Western learning content to enrich their understanding of knowledge and promote cultural diversity in both their new environment and their home country. Here, online Chinese international students predominately employ an integration strategy to engage in learning content. Similar to international students from other countries, online Chinese international students encounter challenges due to differences in educational backgrounds, including differences in learning materials and extensive reading requirements. However, online Chinese international students proactively cope with these challenges by integrating knowledge and skills from their home country into their studies, facilitating successful adaptation to the new environment. In addition, the student interaction experience is undermined by a loss of diversity in content provided by Western universities. Therefore, the recommendations are for online educators and universities to take into account the cultural backgrounds of their students and design diverse course content.

Keywords

Networked learning, international students' experiences, learner-content interaction, Berry's acculturation, higher education, qualitative study

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted students' learning paradigm in conventional higher education (HE), shifting the face-to-face classroom into online delivery. This transition is more dramatic for international Chinese students, previously dominated by traditional campus-based learning. Before the pandemic, taking online distance study at foreign universities was not authorised in China (MOE, 2020). Consequently, little research focused on online international Chinese students' experiences before the pandemic (e.g., Kung, 2017). Even those studies have been criticised for their overuse of monolithic approaches and the underuse of theories, which has resulted in stereotypes and misunderstandings about online Chinese students (Lee & Bligh, 2019; Xu, 2022). In response

to the pandemic, the Chinese government opened a limited window for Chinese students studying abroad, enabling them to remain in China and take online distance courses provided by foreign HE institutions. The size of online international students has expanded significantly and relevant research has rapidly emerged during the pandemic (Turnbull et al., 2021). However, the recorded student experiences during the pandemic were largely affected by the unique challenges posed by the pandemic situation, while reproducing similar prejudices and misconceptions about international Chinese students. Therefore it can be a meaningful effort to explore online international Chinese students' experiences in the post-pandemic situation. The fact that the Chinese government has now closed the window (as of January 28, 2023, Chinese students are no longer allowed to register for online programmes offered by foreign universities, Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange [CSCSE], 2023), it is very timely and necessary to collect the actual voices of international Chinese students who are currently in online networked learning spaces. Building on the ongoing conceptualising effort (NLEC, 2021a), this qualitative study used learner-content interaction (Moore, 1989) and Berry's acculturation (Berry, 2005) to disclose the nature of international Chinese students' interaction with learning content in a networked learning environment. The study aims to provide a holistic and in-depth understanding of online Chinese international students. The paper will contribute to online instructors' understanding of the demands of international students to better support them and to the field of networked learning.

Based on the theoretical framework, three research questions drive this study, as shown below.

RQ. What are international Chinese students' interaction experiences of learning content in the networked learning environment?

RQ 1. What are students' selection of acculturation strategies in engagement with learning content?

RQ 2. How do these students' cultural accumulations affect their interaction experiences of learning content?

Literature Review

Networked learning presents a relational view, emphasising connections between people, between other aspects of learning in online educational settings (NLEC, 2021b). Since the openness of online networked spaces allows varied connections from across the world, cultural diversity is a critical issue from a learning viewpoint. NLEC (2021a) points out that diversity prompts learners to engage in a process of sense-making in which they attempt to connect their individual or collective identity with those of others. However, there is a gap in research regarding cultural diversity in networked learning environments, with more attention placed on students from the Global North than the Global South (Bozkurt & Aydın, 2021). The limited focus generates epistemic injustice of students from the Global South, resulting in stereotypes and prejudices (Catala, 2022; Fricker, 2007; NDLANGAMANDLA, 2024). The epistemic injustice is also reflected in research on Chinese students in HE, in which Chinese students are considered passive agents in learning. For example, Chinese university students are viewed as silent learners since they seldom participate in discussions (Shan, 2020). The cultural adaptability of international Chinese students is perceived to be poor, often characterized by vulnerability and helplessness in the networked learning environment (Yong, 2021). These perceptions have been attributed by scholars to the negative influence of Chinese traditional culture (e.g., Cao et al., 2021; Cheng, 2021). Here, traditional Chinese culture is described as authoritative and collectivist (Du et al., 2016). In such an environment, Chinese students are primarily stereotyped negatively and as passive learners for their characteristics and learning behaviours in networked learning such as Yang (2023). Zhang (2013) observes that online international Chinese students are hesitant to seek help from their lecturers when they are having trouble in their academics because they view their instructors as an authority. However, these statements are flawed, losing the diversity of this online population and creating stereotypes and prejudices. As a result, these deficient narratives may strengthen online tutors' prejudices about different races and/or nationalities in networked learning spaces, as argued by Lee and Bligh (2019) and Xu (2022). Thus, a re-examination of online Chinese students' interaction experiences from a cultural perspective in the post-pandemic is beneficial to challenge these assumptions.

Theoretical framework

Learner-content interaction

Moore (1989) proposes three types of interactions (i.e., learner-learner interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-content interaction). The interpersonal interactions in the networked learning environment are evidenced by the spotlight in studies (Derakhshandeh, 2023). However, learner-content interaction is given less attention. Learner-content interaction is fundamental and of greatest significance to online student learning. Moore (1989) considers that education is impossible without learner-content interaction because learning is the process

of students' intellectual engagement with content. Following this, this project explores international students' interaction in learning content in an intercultural networked environment.

Berry's acculturation

Acculturation is a 'dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their members' (Berry, 2005). Different acculturation strategies are selected when two or more cultural groups come into contact (Berry, 2017). Berry (1974, 1997) explains that the integration strategy is adopted when individuals present a strong connection with their original culture and new cultures; the assimilation strategy is defined as when individuals refuse to connect to their original culture but show high affiliation with other cultures; when individuals present a high connection with original culture and a weak connection with other cultures, separation is the option; the marginalisation strategy means that individuals have a weak connection to both their original culture and other cultures. Although acculturation strategy is widely used in cross-cultural research, there is greater attention to individuals' choices of acculturation strategy in person than in online networked learning spaces. Therefore, this study used Berry's acculturation to explore how students select of acculturation strategy in an intercultural networked learning space.

Methods

Guided by learner-content interaction and Berry's acculturation as a theoretical framework, an interview protocol was developed. After gaining ethical approval in the first author's institution, the first author conducted pilot studies and the second author scrutinised the refined protocol to ensure the reliability and validity of the protocol. Subsequently, purposeful sampling was adopted to locate and select potential respondents who could provide in-depth and rich data (Mandal, 2018). Ultimately, twelve Chinese students who were pursuing a graduate degree through online courses offered by Western countries while they stayed in China were recruited to attend semi-structured interviews. Table 1 shows participants' demographic information, and their names are presented below using pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Then the thematic analysis was adopted to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning/themes around data (Clarke et al., 2015). ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, was adopted to ensure transparency, flexibility and exploration of the data analysis process, yielding more fruitful analysis results (Friese, 2019).

Table 1: Participants' information

| Surname (pseudonym) | Location of universities | Discipline | Duration of participation in online courses | Previous education experience | Is this the first time participating in full-time online learning? | Gender |
|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------|---|-------------------------------|--|--------|
| An | Australia | Linguistics | 10 weeks | CU ¹ | Yes | Female |
| Bai | Australia | Business | 10 weeks | CU | Yes | Female |
| Chen | UK | Business | 10 weeks | CU | Yes | Female |
| Deng | Australia | Linguistics | 10 weeks | CU | Yes | Female |
| Gu | UK | Computer Science | 10 weeks | CU | Yes | Female |
| He | UK | Education | 7 months | CU | Yes | Female |
| Liu | Australia | Linguistics | 10 months | CU | Yes | Female |
| Ma | Australia | Linguistics | 6 months | CU | Yes | Female |
| Qi | Australia | Linguistics | 10 months | CU | Yes | Female |
| Su | Australia | Computer Science | 13 weeks | TU ² | Yes | Male |
| Tang | Australia | Linguistics | 6 months | TU | Yes | Male |
| Zhang | US | Business Studies | 2 years | American university | No | Male |

¹ CU means traditional Chinese universities here.

² TU means transnational universities here.

Analysis and findings

Acculturation is a dynamic process through which individuals continually adjust their options for acculturation strategies based on their criteria to adapt effectively in a cross-cultural environment (Berry, 2017). This session is organized around four main themes encompassing integration dominance, assimilative interaction, evidence of separation and experience of marginalisation. Each of the themes demonstrates the different acculturation strategies adopted by students in different circumstances and includes the influence of students' cultural accumulations on their interaction with learning content.

Integration Dominance

Online Chinese international students predominantly adopted an integration strategy. Here, the students reported that they applied skills and competence gained in their home country to study content provided by their Western universities, which not only helped them adapt to the new environment but was appreciated and encouraged. An and Liu shared how their prior Chinese learning experiences helped them study content provided by their Western universities in the networked learning environment and cope with the differences in resources between China and the West.

An: During my undergraduate in China, my instructors encouraged us to study independently. Even though this was my first time taking online courses provided by an Australian university and there was a volume of papers to read, I was able to manage them well on my own through the study skill I developed as an undergraduate.

Qi: I didn't find it particularly difficult to adapt to the difference between literature-based learning in Australia and textbook-based learning in China. Without the use of a textbook, I was still able to comprehend the key concepts of the materials via interactions with my lecturers and peers. It was in China that I developed the approach for my undergraduate studies. This approach was encouraged by the instructors in online classes in Australia and it helped me get high scores as well.

The integration strategy was further evidenced in the reciprocal knowledge exchange, where students developed an understanding of the contents from different perspectives and brought cultural diversity to their new and domestic environments. Bai shared her accounting learning experiences:

I employed papers and lecturers from my university's online platform to familiarise myself with Australian accounting standards and supplemented my studies with instructional videos from Bilibili (a popular Chinese learning website) to comprehend Chinese accounting standards. Initiating discussions on the accounting standards in different countries, which was beyond my university's curriculum and was warmly welcomed by my instructors and peers. This experience enriched my understanding of cross-culture accounting practices and enhanced my motivation to actively participate in interactions in the online classroom.

Unlike Bai's practice, Liu applied second language acquisition in her discipline to her part-time English teaching work in China, which provided her inspiration on language teaching approaches and broadened her understanding of the practices of Western linguistic theories in the Chinese context.

In these cases, online Chinese international students predominately demonstrated a high affiliation with the original culture and the new culture (Berry, 1997). Berry (1974) posits that the integration strategy allows the individual to freely move from one culture to another, and to choose when to maintain positive intergroup relations, benefiting both the individual and the dominant society. Here, the students applied their skills and competency gained in their home country to learn Western content. This helped them adapt to the new environment and were encouraged and accepted by their teachers and peers, fostering positive intergroup relations. Furthermore, the students carried knowledge from their home country to the Western online classroom and transferred their learning content offered by their Western universities to their home setting. This not only enriched their understanding of knowledge but also brought cultural diversity to the new and home environment.

Assimilative Interaction

Online Chinese international students did not always select the integration strategy. In some cases, the students applied an assimilation strategy, displaying a high connection to the new cultures (Berry, 1997). The students

occasionally abandoned their cultural practices from their home country to align with the Western ways of thinking and succeed academically.

Su: Language is not a barrier. A different way of thinking is the main challenge for me to learn the content. As I wrote my essay, I always considered how a native speaker would organise it. By doing so, my way of thinking was transformed and ultimately I got good scores.

A high appreciation and affinity for Western databases was also captured from the participants' narratives, particularly in their access to textual materials.

Gu: When I looked for literature, [...] I liked to use Google Scholar because it was easier to use, conducted a more comprehensive scan, and targeted higher quality articles than academic search engines in my country. These advantages enabled me to learn a lot, thus I favoured using Western academic search engines to discover new knowledge in my discipline.

In addition, an assimilation strategy emerged from the students' preferences for content language. The participants prioritised English-language materials even when they sourced these materials from their home country. Equally, the participants favoured English-language literature for reading and citation, giving preference to articles written by Chinese scholars in English over those written in Chinese. The main explanations for participants' preferences for English-language resources were 'high quality' (Su), 'widely accepted in academics' (He), and access to 'success' (Zhang).

Overall, the students selected the assimilation strategy to conform to Western academic conventions to achieve academic success. In some cases, students abandoned their cultural practices from their home country to align with Western ways of thinking and achieve academic success. Consequently, the online students' comprehension, viewpoints, and cognitive structures were changed through interaction with learning content (Moore, 1989). The assimilation was further evident in their preference for Western databases. The researchers also noticed that the students placed a high value on English-language materials. This is worrying. The students considered English as the only academic language and perceived English databases and literature were elitist, representing the colonial nature of English and contributing to epistemic injustice of non-dominant knowledge in academics (Catala, 2022; NDLANGAMANDLA, 2024).

Evidence of separation

The students' shared experiences also displayed the separation strategy when it came to their assignment topics. Berry (1974) explains that individuals are free to decide whether they wish to have a strong connection to their own culture and reject a new one in most cases (i.e., voluntary separation). In some occasions, individuals are driven by the larger society to adopt a separation strategy (i.e., involuntary separation). In some instances, the students voluntarily selected the separation strategy, where they tended to focus on Chinese-related topics in their assignments.

An: I was comfortable discussing China-related topics due to my deep understanding of Chinese culture and setting. Furthermore, my unique perspective added diversity to the discourse, which was encouraged by my lecturers.

Not every student voluntarily chose the separation strategy, attributed to the fact that there was not much room in the online classes for them to engage in Western society.

Qi: I regretted not having the opportunity to learn about the application of linguistic theory in Australian classrooms. I could have spent more time in Australia, gotten to know local educators and students, and learned more about their pedagogy if the course had been conducted in person. However, my understanding of the Australian classroom was restricted to the descriptions given by my instructors and students in the online courses.

Overall, responses from the students revealed a preference for maintaining their cultural identity. This decision was voluntary, enhancing cultural diversity in the new environment and students' home context. In a few cases, the selection was enforced due to external factors such as the geographical distance of networked learning.

Experience of marginalisation

In a few moments, the students felt marginalised. Although the students integrated their home culture into learning content provided by their Western universities, they criticised a lack of diversity in the university curriculum, leaving them a sense of isolation and exclusion from the content.

An: I was disappointed that the materials my instructors had given me on language teaching only addressed Western settings and paid little attention to other contexts. Despite my efforts to understand these materials and integrate my cultural background, I encountered challenges due to my lack of prior learning experiences in a Western context. I was not alone in feeling this way. My peers from other different countries faced a similar challenge. This led us to lose motivation to engage in discussion.

Berry (1974) considers that the marginalised group display high levels of apathy and loss of motivation. The lack of cultural diversity in the materials provided by the universities caused the students to 'lose expectation of engaging in the content' (He), thereby negatively affecting their interpersonal connections in the online classroom.

Discussion and conclusion

In conclusion, the research demonstrates an intricate interplay between online Chinese international students' selection of acculturation strategy, their interaction with learning contents and their cultural background. The research argues that online Chinese international students are active agents in their interaction with the learning content and their adaptation to the new setting, in which they bridge a strong connection between Chinese and Western learning content to enrich their understanding of knowledge and promote cultural diversity in both their new environment and their home country. The argument challenges previous scholars' statements that Chinese students are passive learners and that Chinese international students' cultural adaptation is poor in the networked learning environment (Shan, 2020; Yang, 2023; Yong, 2021). This also challenges the previous scholars' narratives that Chinese students' cultural accumulations undermine their learning (Cao et al., 2021; Cheng, 2021). In this research, Chinese international students predominately employ the integration strategy to engage in learning content and they adapt well to cross-cultural networked learning environments. Similar to international students from other countries, Chinese international students encounter challenges due to differences in educational backgrounds, including differences in learning materials and extensive reading requirements in the networked learning environment. However, online Chinese international students proactively cope with these challenges by integrating knowledge and skills from their home country into their studies, facilitating successful adaptation to the new environment. In addition, it is notable that online Chinese students potentially consider English-language materials as central to their content learning. This is hazardous especially when the majority of Chinese students choose to write assignments on topics related to China. This may lead to epistemic injustice of knowledge (Fricker, 2007), reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices related to Chinese knowledge. The research also observes that there is a disconnection between online international students' cultural background and the learning content delivered by their Western universities. When instructing international students and designing online courses, it is suggested that educators take into account the cultural backgrounds of their students and select a variety of teaching materials from various contexts. Finally, the research explores online Chinese international students' interaction experiences from a cultural perspective, contributing to the knowledge of networked learning.

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