

**Learning Experiences of Chinese  
International Students in a UK University:  
Swimming in a Different Pool**

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## Summary

Chinese international students' experiences in UK universities have been studied over the last two decades, with most research focusing on the challenges they face and how they adapt to this new academic environment. However, less attention has been paid to their development and personal growth during the cross-cultural transition. To address this gap, this study explored the learning experiences of Chinese international postgraduate taught students throughout their one-year programme at a UK university. It aimed to explore their experiences, identify the factors that contributed to these experiences, and examine how these experiences developed over time.

With a longitudinal design, this study examined the learning experiences of Chinese international students enrolled in different postgraduate taught programmes across three different Schools within the same UK university. Conducted from January to August 2022, it employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, including semi-structured questionnaires with Likert scales and open-ended questions, and in-depth interviews with 14 selected participants.

The findings of this research revealed four key themes in participants' learning experiences: the application of English language, learning through reasoning and research, learning engagement, and interpersonal dynamics. These experiences were analysed through a multilayered theoretical framework to examine how students' actions and decisions, shaped by their interaction with the new learning environment, contributed to either transformative or miseducative experiences, each distinctly influencing their personal and academic development during cross-cultural transitions. The discussion also drew on the researcher's transient insider position, using personal reflection and the allegory of 'swimming in a different pool' to interpret learning experiences during cross-cultural transition.

This research revealed that participants' experiences during cross-cultural transition unfolded through stages of resistance, reflection, change, and engagement. Whether these experiences became truly educative or transformative depended on reaching a key stage, which was exploring a new role and actively taking steps to enact it.

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## **List of abbreviations**

BCE: Before Common Era

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

CPC: Communist Party of China

EMBA: Executive Master of Business Administration

HEI: Higher Education Institution

HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency

IELTS: International English Language Testing System

MKO: More Knowledgeable Other

PGT: Postgraduate Taught

PhD: Doctor of Philosophy

Q&A: Questions and Answers

TLT: Transformative learning theory

UK: United Kingdom

UKCISA: UK Council for International Students

USA: United States of America

ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Research background**

#### ***1.1.1 Cross-cultural transition in higher education***

Cross-cultural transition refers to the process individuals experience when moving from their native cultural environment to a new one. This shift is often regarded as a potentially challenging and stressful life event (Berry 1994; Roskell 2013).

In the context of higher education, the experiences of individuals who leave their home countries to pursue tertiary education abroad have garnered increasing attention from researchers, educators, and policymakers worldwide (Ramsay et al. 2007; Schartner 2014). For these students, the transition to university in the different cultural environment can be particularly challenging, which could lead to a detrimental effect on their academic performance, psychological wellbeing and overall student experience (Jin and Cortazzi 2006; Turner 2006; Gu and Maley 2008; Holliman et al. 2022; Holliman et al. 2024). The adjustment becomes even more difficult when the methods of learning, teaching, and assessment in higher education diverge significantly from students' prior educational experiences and expectations (Kember 2001). Therefore, this transition becomes especially difficult for students progressing to postgraduate level programmes. This is especially the case when their expectations, shaped by undergraduate experiences, do not align with the requirements of postgraduate study in the different educational environment (Zheng 2015).

With the expansion of global education, understanding these transitions is essential for fostering effective support systems. Particular attention has been given to the academic, psychological, and sociocultural experiences of these students, including specific groups from particular nations or cultural backgrounds, studying in Western universities,

such as those in the UK and the USA (e.g. Schartner 2014; Oyelana 2022; Liu 2022; Liu 2023). Beyond the focus on students, there is also growing scholarly interest in the cross-cultural transitions of educators who move across borders to teach in universities in different countries. This dimension examines the challenges faced by teaching professionals adapting to new cultural and institutional settings (e.g. Roskell 2013; Arnol 2021; Pennington 2022). Therefore, it is essential to enhance the understanding of cross-cultural transitions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This knowledge is vital to effectively support both students and educators as they navigate diverse cultural environments.

### ***1.1.2 International students in UK universities***

International students, as per the definition provided by the Migration Advisory Committee (2018), encompass individuals who are not residents of the UK and arrive to pursue education at any level. The presence of international students in UK higher education has grown substantially since the 1980s. Government policies have actively promoted this trend, which is evident in initiatives such as the Prime Minister's Initiative in 1999, led by Tony Blair, who was the Prime Minister of the UK at that time. During this initiative, Tony Blair emphasised the necessity of recruiting a greater number of international students. The long-term worldwide educational campaign has led to a steady increase in international student numbers in the UK. Recently, the UK government reaffirmed its commitment to sustainable growth by setting a target of 600,000 international students annually (GOV.UK 2023).

Among this diverse group in the UK, Chinese international students form one of the largest demographics within the international student population, further underlining their significance in the UK higher education landscape. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2025), a total of 679,970 international students were pursuing their degrees in the UK during the 2021/2022 academic year, which

corresponded to the data collection period of this research. In 2022, the largest group of international students in the UK were from China, comprising 22.3% of the total. Since 2023, India had overtaken China as the largest source of international students in the UK. Together, students from India and China accounted for 48% of all non-EU international students in the 2023/24 academic year. Compared to the previous year, HESA (2025) reported a 7% decline in overall international student enrolments in 2023/24. This decline was particularly concerning at the postgraduate taught (PGT) level, which saw a year-on-year decrease of 4.5%, attributed to tightened visa regulations and increased global competition for international students.

For international students, differences in educational systems and learning cultures between their home countries and the UK often create a steep learning curve (Bache and Hayton 2012; Hall and Sung 2009). This is further intensified at postgraduate level, where the demands and expectations differ markedly from undergraduate study. The UK's PGT programmes are distinctive in their intensity (typically lasting only one year) and require students to quickly engage with a wide range of subject content, attend lectures and seminars, and complete various forms of assessment, including essays, presentations, exams, and a dissertation, all within a condensed timeframe (Coneyworth et al. 2020; Chen 2023).

In addition to the fast pace and high workload, international PGT students are expected to demonstrate a high level of academic autonomy and critical engagement. Critical thinking, in particular, is widely regarded as a key differentiator between undergraduate and postgraduate study (Melles 2009; Watson and Reissner 2010), yet it might be an unfamiliar skill for students from educational backgrounds that relatively emphasise rote learning or exam-based performance.

### ***1.1.3 Chinese international students in Western universities***

Since 1992, the CPC Central Committee and the central government have issued guidelines to encourage and support students and scholars studying abroad (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2009). Despite the pandemic in 2020, the Ministry of Education reaffirmed in 2021 its commitment to supporting study abroad to cultivate international talent (Department for Education and Department for International Trade 2021).

Additionally, Chinese one-child families, driven by the belief that education is crucial for a better life (Yi et al. 2011), allocate more resources to provide better education for their younger members (Austin and Shen 2016). China's economic growth has created a middle class able to invest in the education of their only child, increasing the demand for educational resources internationally (Li and Li 2010; Austin and Shen 2016).

Recent statistics reveal that China holds the top position in sending students abroad, with the United States hosting the highest number of Chinese students, followed by Australia and the UK (Parulis-Cook 2022). Given that Chinese international students make up the largest contingent within the international student population, there has been a growing interest in conducting studies on this particular cohort's study experiences in higher education. While much of the existing research of Chinese international students has concentrated on undergraduate students, the experiences of PGT students still remain underexplored (Quan et al. 2016; Holliman et al. 2024). PGT students typically undertake intensive programmes, giving them less time to gradually engage with the academic culture and expectations (Arambewela and Hall 2013; Quan et al. 2016). Their experiences may differ significantly, requiring closer attention to how they negotiate academic demands within a compressed timeframe. Recent studies (e.g., Holliman et al. 2022) have called for more in-depth qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of Chinese PGT students during the cross-cultural transition, as this

process can significantly affect their learning attainment and psychological wellbeing.

#### ***1.1.4 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022***

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the UK responded in early 2020 with a series of measures to address this global health crisis. These measures encompassed national and regional lockdowns, the closure of non-essential businesses and schools, and the widespread adoption of social distancing measures, including a recommended minimum distance of two meters between individuals.

Throughout the 2020/21 academic year, UK universities underwent significant transformation as they made a sudden pivot towards remote learning, with many adopting blended learning strategies as part of their responses to the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic-induced disruptions to traditional teaching methods compelled institutions to adapt swiftly to online and blended formats, particularly in light of strict lockdowns and travel restrictions. The adoption of a blended learning approach not only ensured the continuity of education but also allowed for flexibility in adapting to the changing circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

Since the summer of 2021, following the removal of social distancing policies, universities in the UK reopened their campuses to welcome all students for the commencement of the new academic year in 2021/2022. Universities are still using blended learning methods, so most seminars, small group classes and lab work are taught in-person, with these experiences being supported through digital learning strategies and high-quality online materials for self-study. These are intended to complement traditional learning experiences, such as lectures.

Current published studies concerning international students' cross-cultural transition experiences during this period, particularly those focusing on Chinese international

students in Western universities, have largely centred on issues related to anti-Asian sentiment and students' mental wellbeing. For instance, several studies have explored Chinese international students' experiences and perceptions of racialised microaggressions during the COVID-19 pandemic, often situated within broader discussions of racial trauma and the implementation of trauma-informed care in higher education settings (e.g. Hu 2024; Xie and Xu 2024; Yu et al 2024).

## **1.2 Personal experiences and inspiration for the research**

### ***1.2.1 My personal academic and professional experiences in UK universities***

In 2006, I arrived in the UK for the first time as a young teenager, participating in a valuable exchange program to study in a local high school for a term in the summer. This experience was particularly precious to me, representing my initial exposure to a school environment extremely different from those in China. One aspect that left a lasting impression was the flexibility within British schools. I was impressed by the teachers allowing students to choose their seats and sit in a circle around them in a high school classroom. The option to select different modules, even during the compulsory education stage, and the freedom to move between classrooms were unexpected to me. In China, for high school students, we were given fixed timetables with only compulsory modules and assigned a fixed table and seat in the classrooms, while the teachers stood in a higher position in front of us in class. The flexibility of the UK education system made a lasting impression during my brief stay, sparking my interest to further study in this country.

Subsequently, in 2011, I returned to the UK for higher education. Since then, the UK has been my primary residence for the past 14 years. During this period, I spent several months studying an undergraduate-level module at one UK university in the north and pursued a 12-month postgraduate degree at another in the Midlands. After graduating

in 2013, I began working in the UK, and most of my professional experiences involved collaborating with students, particularly international students. Since 2016, I have worked in administrative roles at a UK university in the south, focusing on international student recruitment, support, and training. Over the past four years, I have expanded my responsibilities by teaching humanities modules as a tutor, combining academic and administrative expertise to support student development.

### ***1.2.2 From personal experience to the inspiration for the research***

Over the past nine years, my journey has deeply immersed me in the experiences of international students, evolving from my own role as an international student to serving and teaching them as a university staff member. I encountered quite a few Chinese students facing significant challenges during their studies in the UK. One memorable instance involved a student who approached my office seeking guidance on withdrawing from their PGT course after only two weeks into the term. Instead of providing withdrawal instructions, I opted for an alternative approach. I arranged one-to-one meetings with the student and Chinese professors in the school, believing they could provide personalised academic and personal advice in Chinese. The reason for choosing Chinese professors initially stemmed from a concern about the language barrier. In the end, the student chose not to withdraw and eventually graduated with merit in their postgraduate degree one year later. Before returning back to China, they expressed sincere gratitude to me for the assistance during their first few months in the UK. This experience prompted my initial consideration of conducting a more in-depth study on Chinese postgraduate students' experiences in the UK. I pondered whether the challenges they faced were solely due to cultural shock and language barriers, or if there were additional factors such as their own level of effort influencing their academic studies in the UK.

What solidified my decision to pursue research on the experiences of Chinese

international students in the UK was my husband's failure in one of his modules during his EMBA at a local British university, despite having lived in the UK for years. He received a low score of 37% on an essay assessing the leadership of a business leader in China. Frustrated, he complained to me that his British lecturer could not fully comprehend an essay written by a Chinese student about a Chinese business leader, attributing it to cultural differences. At that moment, I had an epiphany: perhaps the challenges Chinese students face when completing a PGT course in the UK are not solely related to language or cultural shock. There may be other factors that make it difficult for local educators to fully understand a Chinese student's assignment. This realisation led me to resolve to undertake a PhD-level research study focused on exploring Chinese students' learning experiences during their cross-cultural transition in UK universities.

### **1.3 Research questions and significance**

#### ***1.3.1 Research rationale and questions***

There are several reasons why I consider it important to research the experiences of Chinese international students on PGT courses at UK universities. As the UK government continues to promote sustainable growth in international student recruitment, Chinese PGT students represent a key demographic in British higher education. Understanding their experiences can provide valuable insights for institutions and policymakers. Meanwhile, these students often face intense academic and cultural challenges during their short but demanding study period, yet this group remains under-researched. Exploring their cross-cultural transitions can help fill this gap and support efforts to enhance their learning experience to improve academic performance and overall wellbeing. In addition, my personal and professional experiences make this research not only meaningful but also a way to better understand my own journey.

I initially proposed a small-scale, longitudinal study to answer the research question: *What are Chinese PGT international students' cross-cultural transition experiences at a UK university?* As the research progressed and engagement with literature deepened, particularly in exploring learning theories, the research questions evolved into more nuanced layers. Based on the related published literature on international students, I shifted the first layer of research question to focus more on the challenges students faced. Incorporating theoretical frameworks, the question expanded to another layer to explore how participants interpreted factors shaping their experiences. Additionally, the research question evolved to examine the development of these experiences over time, adding a longitudinal layer. These changes deepened the exploration both in terms of horizontal (development) and vertical (interpretations) dimensions, with a more detailed discussion of this evolution in Chapter 3.

By addressing these research questions, the study aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese PGT students' learning experiences, focusing on their development rather than mere adjustment in a different cultural environment. Furthermore, due to my unique personal experiences from years of studying, working in student services, and teaching in UK universities, this research offers a distinct lens through which to interpret their experiences. My background provides a deeper understanding from both educator and learner perspectives, allowing for a more in-depth analysis.

### ***1.3.2 Significance of the research***

By answering the above research question, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the learning experiences of Chinese PGT students in the UK. Therefore, the recommendations derived from this research's findings would be beneficial to enhancing the learning experiences of a substantial cohort of international students throughout their overseas studies. These recommendations hold particular significance

as they may diverge significantly from the conventional language support courses and general international student support services typically provided by UK universities.

Furthermore, insights from this research can also inform policy decisions and institutional strategies aimed at promoting diversity and inclusivity in UK higher education. Appropriately recognising and responding to the cultural nuances that influence the learning experiences of international students could also lead to the implementation of policies and schemes that enhance intercultural communication, collaboration, and mutual understanding within the university community.

The findings of this research seek to offer valuable insights for potential PGT international students, helping them better understand and navigate the challenges they face in a different learning environment. For example, this research would provide a clearer understanding of the academic requirements, teaching methods, and overall academic culture in the UK, enabling students to adapt more effectively.

#### **1.4 The structure of the thesis**

The title of this thesis, ‘Swimming in a different pool’, was inspired by a personal experience involving an accident with my toddler and observing my children’s swimming lessons. This title served as an allegorical reflection for the learning journey of Chinese PGT international students in an unfamiliar academic and cultural environment. Just as a swimmer adapted to a different pool from where they initially learned, the students were learning in a foreign academic context, where both cultural and educational environments might differ significantly from their own.

Chapter 1 offered a thorough background for this research, describing the current landscape of international students in UK universities, with a specific emphasis on Chinese international students, and the existing research on their experiences in Western universities. It further explained the post-COVID-19 context in which the research was

conducted. This chapter also included the researcher's personal experiences in UK universities, introduced the main research questions, and highlighted the study's significance.

The next chapter presents a review of the research and theories relevant to this study. The first section of Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the cross-cultural transition experiences of both Chinese international students, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, in UK universities. The second section introduces the theoretical frameworks of learning employed in this research.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 outline the methodology and research methods employed in this study. Chapter 3 explains the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research, detailing the specific research questions, research paradigm, researcher's positionality and how the multilayer theoretical frameworks are applied to analyse the data. Chapter 4 introduces the mixed-method longitudinal design, sampling strategy, and the tools used for qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. Additionally, this chapter explores the research's limitations, reliability, trustworthiness, and the researcher's positionality.

The following two chapters present the findings of this research. Chapter 5 explores the participants' learning experiences as they navigated their education in a different cultural environment, with a focus on the challenges they faced. Chapter 6 delves into their development during the cross-cultural transition throughout their 12-month study in the UK, along with two focused investigations based on interview data from participants who failed modules.

Chapter 7 constitutes a thorough discussion of the research findings, offering an in-depth exploration of how the participants' experiences were vividly illustrated using the allegory of 'swimming in a different pool.' It also interprets the findings through the

chosen theoretical frameworks while integrating my personal reflections on the process.

Chapter 8 concludes this research with a thorough discussion of the main findings with tables. Furthermore, it provides suggestions to address challenges faced by international students in the UK. This chapter also covers the contributions, implications, and limitations of the research, along with recommendations for future studies. Additionally, it features a personal reflection on my experiences throughout the PhD study.

### **1.5 Chapter summary**

In conclusion, my personal experiences as a Chinese international student, coupled with my professional involvement with them, sparked a deep interest in exploring their experiences in UK universities. Initially, I attributed their challenges to language barriers and cultural shock, but further inquiry highlighted the need to examine these difficulties in greater depth.

I embarked on this study to specifically investigate the learning experiences of Chinese PGT students in the UK. The findings aim to provide a clearer understanding of their experiences in diverse academic and cultural settings.

To lay the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of these influences, the next chapter will review existing literature on international students' experiences during cross-cultural transitions, alongside the learning theories that underpin this research.

## **Chapter 2 Review of related research and theories**

This chapter contains two parts: the first part examines published studies on the cross-cultural transitions of Chinese international students in the UK; while the second part explores the learning theories relevant to this study, with a focus on social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978), Dewey's (1916; 1943; 1938) theory of experience and educative experience, and Mezirow's (1991; 2000; 2012) Transformative Learning Theory (TLT).

### **2.1 Cross-cultural transition experiences of Chinese international students in UK universities**

Research on cross-cultural experiences of Chinese international students in Western higher education usually highlights themes of adjustment, acculturation, and language proficiency. Studies explore international students' learning skills and approach (Li et al. 2022; Campbell 2010), student adjustments and acculturation (Lin and Yi 1997; Taylor and Ali 2017; Huang et al. 2022; Xiong et al. 2025), and the role of language in academic success and preparation for Western education (Ballard 1996; Cai 2013; Martirosyan et al. 2015). For both Chinese postgraduate and undergraduate students studying at UK universities, much of the existing research has concentrated on the academic challenges they face when adjusting to UK higher education institutions (e.g. Chien 2015; Quan et al. 2016), as well as their learning characteristics and approaches (e.g. Ryan 2013; Busher 2016; Chen 2023). The following sections review relevant published research on the learning experiences of overall Chinese international students in UK universities, with particular attention to those enrolled in PGT courses.

#### ***2.1.1 Transition to a new cultural environment***

##### *i. Cultural shock*

One widely studied area regarding the cross-cultural transition of international students

is culture shock. There are differing views on whether culture shock aids or hinders adjustment to a new environment. The term culture shock was first introduced in 1960, and it was used to describe the experience of individuals living in a new environment (Oberg 1960). In early research, many researchers explained culture shock as the unpleasant feelings suffered by those who enter a new cultural environment. They define culture shock as the anxiety from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse (Oberg 1960; Hall 1976), leading to feelings of distress, confusion, anxiety, helplessness and hostility towards an unfamiliar environment (Robert 1984; Hofstede 1991). This can cause significant changes in thinking or behaviour (Locke and Feinsod 1982). In recent research, culture shock is increasingly viewed as “a potential trigger for personal development” (Wang 2018b). Cultural shock is seen as a driver for social, psychological, and educational development, because it is an important factor in helping people become more effective and competent, often triggered by challenges in everyday activities (Montuori and Fahim 2004; Zhou et al. 2008; He et al. 2024).

ii. *Cultural shock for international students in the UK*

Upon arriving in a different nation, international students may face significant culture shocks. This is reported as an issue by many researchers, highlighting substantial cultural differences in language, communication styles, educational systems, social relationships and values (Li and Yi 1997; Wu and Hammond 2011; Shu 2016; Haxton 2019; Chen 2023; He et al. 2024). For international students, studying abroad implies a loss of what they used to take for granted. To some extent, it also represents an extensive interaction between the individual student and the new environment, in which the student is constantly positioned to face unsparing challenges (Murphy-Lejeune 2003).

In the UK, based on the guidance of UKCISA (UK Council for International Students 2025), several factors can contribute to culture shock among international students, including climate, food, language, social roles, behavioural norms, and underlying cultural values. A useful model (see Figure 2.1), the W-shaped curve of adjustment (Baker 1990), can illustrate the emotional and physical adaptation patterns of students studying abroad. This model delineates the journey of international students, beginning with the initial excitement upon arrival in the UK, the journey progresses through the disintegration stage, which involves a low point in independence and a peak in culture shock. Then, a notable reduction in culture shock is observed after the first semester for international students, attributable to the process of cross-cultural adjustment, which is a positive development for international students (Campell 2010; Wang et al. 2012). Subsequently, international students start to gain confidence after the disintegration stage and gradually reach the independence stage, experiencing a growing sense of enjoyment in various situations before they return to their home country.

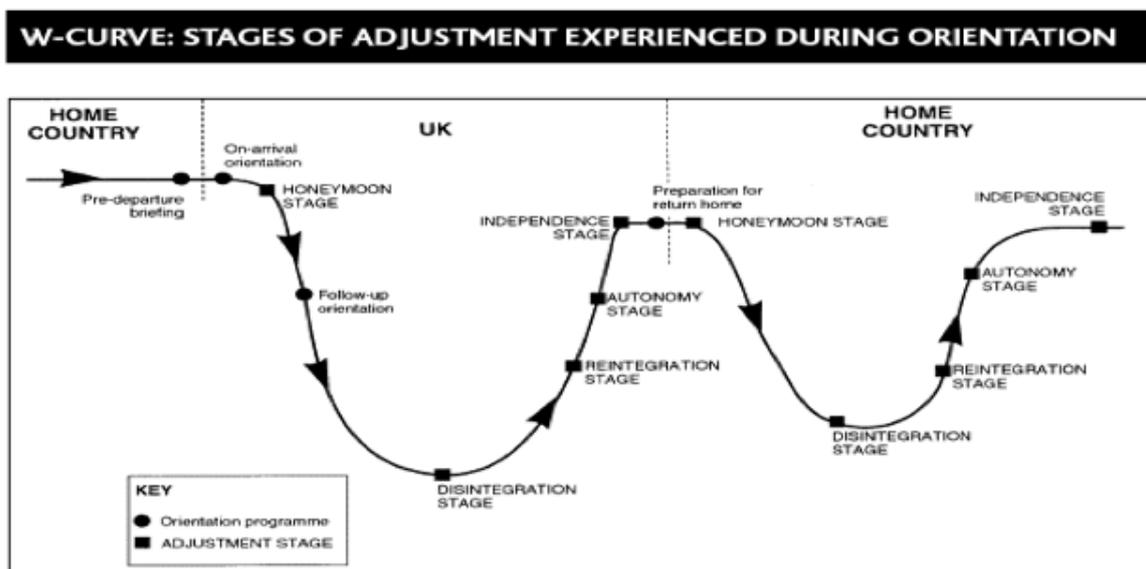


Figure 2.1 W-shaped curve of adjustment on UKCISA website

### 2.1.2 Transition to a new learning environment

In addition to the general culture shock, international students may also suffer from

academic culture shock, or learning shock, during their transitions between educational systems in different countries (Gu 2005; Rastall 2006; Turner 2006a; Gu and Maley 2008; Li et al. 2010; Wu and Hammond 2011; Wang 2018a; Holliman et al. 2024). This particular type of shock refers to the unpleasant feelings and difficult experiences that learners encounter when they are exposed to a new learning environment (Gu and Maley 2008), which are intensified and can impose a deeper psychological and emotional strain on learners that are crossing national and/or cultural borders (Gu 2005; Turner 2006a; Holliman et al. 2024). For international students, the two major learning shocks are adapting to academic settings in a different language and adjusting to new academic cultural environments.

*i. Learning in English-speaking academic settings*

One significant learning shock for international students in English-medium institutions, particularly those whose first language is not English, is the proficiency in English language use (Ballard 1996; Cai 2013; Chen 2023). Language proficiency has a direct and significant impact on how meaningful the international student's learning is, which not only affects international students' academic achievement but also social and psychological adjustment when studying overseas (Badur 2003; Wu and Hammond 2011; Taylor and Ali 2017; Holliman et al. 2024; Ruegg et al. 2024).

Several studies highlight the significance of improving language proficiency as a crucial preparatory step for overseas study and academic success (Poyrazli 2003; Li et al. 2010; Wu and Hammond 2011; Martirosyan et al. 2015; Taylor and Ali 2017; Ruegg et al. 2024), Limited language skills might hinder writing, reading, and comprehension, affecting students' ability to follow lectures and perform well in assessments (Poyrazli 2003; Erichsen and Bolliger 2011; Ruegg et al. 2024).

Moreover, low self-confidence in English can lead to social and academic isolation (Trice 2007; Wu and Hammond 2011), affecting adjustment and integration (Wu and

Hammond 2011; Young and Schartner 2014). However, higher English proficiency enhances classroom participation (Young and Schartner 2014; Taylor and Ali 2017) and social engagement (Holliman et al. 2024). Confident English communication not only facilitates connections with local communities, which helps reduce loneliness and homesickness (Hayes and Lin 1994; Young and Schartner 2014), but also enables deeper cultural immersion (Kim 2005).

*ii. Learning in different academic cultures*

Apart from language application in academic settings, learning shock is also directly associated with the academic cultures of an educational institution, including the education system, lecture style, assessment, relationship between students and lecturers, learning approach and so on (Li et al. 2010; Zhu and O’Sullivan 2020; Holliman et al. 2024). The challenges of adapting to a different academic culture are more intense than adapting to a different cultural and social environment for international students (Gu 2009; Gu et. al. 2010; Wu and Hammond 2011) due to their unfamiliarity with different teaching and learning traditions (Gu and Maley 2008). For example, a teaching or learning approach considered universal and common sense in one culture may be seen as unusual and ineffective in another (Gu and Schweisfurth 2006).

This particular learning shock appears to be especially challenging for international students from Asia to study in Western educational settings because their learning culture distinguishes greatly from the host culture (Hofstede 1991; Li et al. 2010; Newsome and Cooper 2016; Wang 2018a; Zhu and O’Sullivan 2020). For example, when adjusting academically to the local teaching and learning culture in Western countries, Asian students may be particularly uncomfortable with critical exchange and contradiction, as they may not consider it appropriate to subject lecturers and academic texts to critical scrutiny (Hofstede 1991).

iii. *A critical perspective on learning in Western universities*

Most research on international students' adaptation in Western universities often assumes that they must conform to the Western academic environment to succeed. However, recent critical perspectives on internationalism in higher education challenge and critique the deficit narratives surrounding international students (Heng 2018; Moosavi 2020; Lomer et al. 2023; Mittelmeier et al. 2024). Research shaped by those deficit narratives typically emphasises the *challenges and adjustments* international students are expected to make, often focusing on their perceived lack of “Western academic knowledge and values” (Ryan 2016, p.13). These students are frequently portrayed as deficient in areas such as subject knowledge, language proficiency, and academic skills. Such literature tends to frame them in negative terms by using language like *barriers, challenges, problems, and struggles* (Lomer and Mittelmeier 2021). Critics argue that these struggles should not be seen solely as individual deficits but as reflections of broader institutional and structural barriers (Mittelmeier et al. 2024).

Some researchers on international students in UK universities suggest that these challenges arise not because of student shortcomings but because universities maintain Western-centric academic expectations. For instance, Britain could dictate the framework of the “global knowledge game,” resulting in intellectual standardisation and a lack of diverse expression, while disregarding varied learning traditions (Turner 2006b). Instead of focusing solely on how students must adapt, some researchers argue that the emphasis should be on examining how universities contribute to or challenge systemic inequalities in international education (Mittelmeier et al. 2024).

***2.1.3 Cross-cultural transitions experiences of Chinese international students in UK universities***

As Chinese international students constitute one of the largest demographics within the

international student population, more and more academic publications about Chinese international students in UK HEIs have been carried out since the end of the last century. Academic literature on Chinese international students has primarily focused on their increasing numbers and the challenges they face when adapting to the British university settings, often framing these challenges through the lens of cultural adjustment (e.g., Quan et al. 2016; Chien 2015; Zheng 2015; Wang 2018a; Zhang 2020; Zhao and Schartner 2023). Therefore, their adjustment experiences are frequently viewed as a process of fitting into the host culture, with less attention given to how students develop during these cross-cultural transitions.

In addition, though the existing studies have explored Chinese students' experiences in the UK, they have largely focused on the adjustment processes of undergraduate students (Brown and Holloway 2008; Holliman et al. 2022). However, these findings may not be directly applicable to Chinese students on PGT courses, due to differences in academic expectations, course structures, and timeframes. This highlights a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of Chinese PGT students and their developmental journeys within new academic environments.

The following section will examine their learning experiences in the UK in greater depth, drawing on recent research with particular attention to the challenges they face, and identifying aspects that may be specific to the PGT context.

*i. Experiences with English language application*

One widely recognised learning shock for Chinese international students across different levels of study in the UK is the difficulty they experience in expressing their opinions in English, both orally and in writing (Gu and Schweisfurth 2006; Holliman et al. 2024; Zhao and Schartner 2023).

a) *Verbal communication in English*

Many Chinese international students experience ineffective communication during their different levels of studies in the UK (Jin 1992; Gu and Schweisfurth 2006; Tian and Lowe 2009; Zhu and Gao 2012; Holliman et al. 2024). Their verbal interaction in learning is determined by their tendency to remain quiet in class, engage less, and participate minimally in group discussions or group work with tutors and peers (Jin and Cortazzi 2006; Tian and Lowe 2009; Zhu and Gao 2012; Zhu and O’Sullivan 2020).

One potential reason is their perceived lack of confidence in language use and social interaction in a new cultural setting (Zhu and O’Sullivan 2020; Holliman et al. 2024), which can lead some Chinese international students to feel ignored during group work (Tian and Lowe 2009; McMahon 2011). Although many students express their wish to contribute, anxiety around their English language skills prohibited them from fully participating in classroom discussions and group work (Wang 2012; Wang 2018a). Meanwhile, some students are unable to understand their peers’ opinions or ideas, which hinders their ability to participate, leading to a shared feeling of being marginalised among most Chinese students (Tian and Lowe 2009).

b) *Academic writing in English*

Chinese students also encounter challenges in understanding the written form of the language in reading and writing (Holliman et al. 2024). Writing essays in English is identified as another major difficulty faced by all level of Chinese international students at Western universities (Jin 1992; Lin and Yi 1997; Gu 2009; Zhu and Gao 2012; Wang 2018a; Holliman et al. 2024), and it is even regarded as the most challenging aspect, including by postgraduate students who have previously studied in the UK for several years (Wang 2018a).

Research indicates that even international students who meet the English language

requirements of their courses often struggle to meet the expected standards in certain aspects of academic writing (Yen and Kuzma 2009). One potential reason is that, as non-native English-speaking writers, Chinese international students have fewer linguistic resources, less exposure to written texts and less experience in writing in English (Li et al. 2010). This is particularly evident among Chinese PGT students, as their prior undergraduate writing experience often does not sufficiently prepare them for the demands of academic writing at an English-medium university (Tian and Lowe 2009; Chen 2023).

In addition, when Chinese international students come to study in the UK, they shift from merely learning English as a second language to using it as a tool for academic study, engaging in the process of academic writing in a second language within a new academic environment (Wette and Furneaux 2018; Chen 2023). Succeeding in their studies demands more than just proficient English language skills. Therefore, they also need to apply English as a tool for acquiring and implementing learning and study skills in Western universities (Ballard 1996), which could be extremely challenging.

## *ii. Transition to the Western learning environment*

Apart from English language proficiency, the differences in pedagogy and instructional methods between China and Western countries can also contribute to another learning shock for Chinese international students in diverse UK university degrees (Jin 1992; Jin and Cortazzi 2006; Turner 2006a; Tian and Lowe 2009; Zhu and Gao 2012; Wang 2015; Wang 2018a; Holliman et al. 2024).

### *a) Comparison of Chinese and British academic values*

Ryan (2012; 2016) indicates that most published literature on learning cultures tends to contrast Western and Chinese educational approaches, therefore, simple stereotypes can be misleading. However, national educational cultures reflect different historical and

cultural contexts. These variations lead to different academic values and teaching traditions between countries like China and the UK. Based on her experiences and research in the UK and China over several decades and an extensive review of related literature, Ryan (2010; 2012; 2016) compares the academic values between Chinese and British education systems, presented in Table 2.1.

*Table 2.1 Comparison of Chinese and British academic values (Ryan 2012, p. 282)*

<i>China</i>	<i>UK</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of knowledge</li> <li>• Learn from the teacher</li> <li>• Respect teachers and texts</li> <li>• Harmony of the group</li> <li>• Consensus /avoiding conflict</li> <li>• 'Reflective' learners</li> <li>• Critique of the 'self'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Type of (critical) thinking</li> <li>• Independent learning</li> <li>• Question teachers and texts</li> <li>• Student-centred learning</li> <li>• Argumentation /assertiveness</li> <li>• 'Deep' learners seeking meaning</li> <li>• Critique of the 'other'</li> </ul>

In the following sections, I will compare and categorise the areas highlighted in the above table, along with other related research, into three major differences in the learning environment that Chinese students encounter across various levels of study at UK universities.

*b) Transition to a less hierarchical learning environment*

Throughout its history, education in China has been profoundly influenced by the philosophy and system of Confucius (Hu 2002; Xie and Chen 2013; Zhao 2017; Tian 2017), who was a Chinese philosopher and educator whose teachings on morality, social relationships, and justice shaped thought and culture between 551 and 479 BCE (Yao 2000; Van Norden 2017). Although the modern Chinese education system has not formally adopted the Confucian educational model, Confucian philosophy has profoundly permeated education in China (Shu 2016). This philosophy in education is principally characterised by two key concepts: hierarchy and obedience (Hu 2004). In this case, teachers' high social status in China sets them at the upper end of the power

relation as the experts and authorities, they are regarded as the all-knower, the giver, who fills students (at the lower end) up with knowledge (Jin 1992). This contributed to a hierarchical learning environment for students in China.

When Chinese students come to study in the UK, where the learning environment is less rigidly organised and promotes more egalitarian values, they may face several challenges adapting to the different academic cultures.

*1) From gaining knowledge to practising academic thinking*

As shown in Table 2.1, Ryan (2012) points out that Chinese academic ideals value knowledge, while British academics put more emphasis on the thinking process. Ryan (2012) further explains this difference with an example: In China, a PhD student at a viva panel is likely to be asked about their research findings, such as the contribution to knowledge. While, in the UK, a panel is more likely to ask about the methodology and how the knowledge was generated. Other research also suggests that Western education values the development of creative thinking, interaction, and real-life problem-solving skills (Kang and Chang 2016; Hassan et al. 2010); while Chinese education focuses more on acquiring knowledge from teachers, emphasising pragmatic learning, behavioural changes, and essential knowledge acquisition (Tweed and Lehman 2002; Huang and Cowden 2009).

Therefore, Chinese international students in UK universities may have difficulties in applying the required level of thinking skills across different stages of study. For instance, Chinese students have been reported to exhibit limited application of academic reasoning when writing essays (Cai 2013), and are sometimes portrayed as using distinct reasoning approaches (Qu and Song 2024). They are often regarded as lacking the critical thinking skills central to academic criteria and assessment (Song 2016). For international postgraduate students in general, engaging with criticality in

written assignments is often seen as one of the most significant challenges (Evans et al. 2018). This issue appears to be even more pronounced among Chinese postgraduate students, whose previous educational experiences in China tend to emphasise memorisation over independent or critical thinking. Additionally, they often struggle to understand the concept of critical thinking in academic writing and to distinguish proper academic citation and referencing from plagiarism (Tian and Lowe 2009; Wang 2018a; Chen 2023), as they experience a mismatch between their previous and current academic writing practices. This distinction highlights the difference between actively using published literature to develop and justify their own arguments (demonstrating reasoning skills) and passively reporting information from others without deeper analysis (indicating a more superficial level of knowledge).

## *2) From accepting teacher's authority to critically reflecting on teaching*

The hierarchical structure in the Chinese educational environment is intended to promote harmony and discourage challenging authority (teachers in this case). As teachers are considered as experts and authorities, therefore they are not supposed to be challenged and questioned by the lower end, such as students (Xu and Hu 2020). Teachers' respectful positioning in China can make students more cautious about expressing criticism, often keeping thoughts to themselves or asking for clarification diplomatically (Ryan 2012). In addition, Chinese students tend to be less vocal in sharing their thoughts or asking questions, appearing quieter and more reserved compared to Western students while studying at different academic levels in the UK (Ryan 2012; Wang 2016; Wang 2018a; Chang 2021; Zhu and O'Sullivan 2020). This may stem from a learning culture in which students are expected to defer contributing new ideas until they have achieved a high level of mastery (Jin and Cortazzi 2006). Hence, it becomes neither polite nor acceptable for the learners to challenge their teachers' authority in class.

Alternatively, Western education environment fosters a more equal relationship between learners and teachers, valuing and encouraging diverse opinions and perspectives. Students are encouraged to think critically and express their views during group discussions or assignments (Hassan et al. 2010). For example, students in the UK are expected to participate and engage in dialogue and engage in critical analysis instead of just absorbing what the teachers say (Zhou et. al. 2009).

Therefore, students in the UK are expected to learn critically and “deeply” by delving into controversial subjects for academic progress and the creation of new knowledge; while Chinese students are expected to “follow the master” in class (Ryan 2010, p.43). However, while Chinese students are often portrayed as relying on low-level memorisation strategies and lacking critical thinking skills (Wu 2015; Song 2016), this view has been challenged by scholars such as Heng (2018; 2019) and Ryan (2016), who call for a more nuanced understanding. Research also emphasises the need to move beyond simplistic national labels, recognising the influence of study level, academic discipline, and the complexity and diversity of Chinese international students’ prior experiences (Wu 2015; Heng 2019).

*c) Transition to a more student-centred learning environment*

*1) From dependent learning to independent learning*

The hierarchical teacher-student relationship in China also results in a more teacher-led educational system in China, where learners prefer a teacher-centred approach and rely more heavily on their instructors (Jin 1992; Guan and Meng 2007; Gu 2009; Yan and Berliner 2009; Wang 2016; Holliman et al. 2024). On the other hand, Western educational systems, in general, appear to emphasise greater autonomy, independence, and self-regulation by learners. In many cases, Western learning environments value a learner-centred, process-oriented style, which encourages students to actively engage in their own learning (Merriam et al. 2007; Ryan 2010; Hassan et al 2010).

In the UK, the focus on learning is much more on the learner, where the responsibility is put on the student to contribute to their studies after the teachers set the tasks for them (Jin 1992). Teachers function as facilitators rather than sole providers of knowledge, guiding and supporting students in their learning process rather than instructing them on what to do (Hassan et al. 2010). As a result, a common learning shock for Chinese international students across different levels of study is the expectation of greater independent learning and reduced instructor supervision in UK education. During their study in the UK, they often demand more than guidelines from their tutors and expect a very didactic style of teaching (Jin 1992; Guan and Meng 2007; Gu 2009; Ryan 2010; Wang 2016). Some researchers negatively describe them as rote, passive and dependent learners (Samuelowicz 1987; Gu 2009; Zhu and Gao 2012), especially for PGT students, as they may lack training in reflective thinking and independent interpretation from their prior experiences in a more teacher-centred learning higher education environment (Turner 2006a; Holliman et al. 2024).

However, research also shows that some Chinese students, during their studies in the UK, are active learners, who have developed independent learning abilities and a stronger sense of responsibility for their studies (Gu and Schweisfurth 2006; Gu 2009; Zhu and O'Sullivan 2020).

## 2) *Maintaining pluralistic harmony in class*

Another outcome of the student-centred learning environment in the UK is its strong emphasis on individual thinking and expression in academic practice (Jin 1992). As shown in Table 2.1, this is reflected in the British academic values of encouraging argumentation, assertiveness, and critique of others. On the other hand, Chinese academic values emphasise harmony, a concept rooted in Confucian thought. This may lead some students to prioritise and maintain pluralistic harmony. This emphasis on harmony is reflected in the academic value placed on group cohesion, the avoidance of

conflict, and a tendency to critique oneself, rather than others in class (Ryan 2012; Zhu and O'Sullivan 2020; Holliman et al. 2024).

Since Confucian thought views the relationship between individuals and their community as continuous and inseparable (Schwartz 1994; Chen 2017; Yuan et al. 2023), so one needs to understand and share a system of values and social norms with others (Shu 2016; Chen 2017). This emphasis on pluralistic harmony contributes to an interesting cultural phenomenon: the concept of *face* in Chinese culture. Maintaining everyone's face in the sense of dignity, self-respect, and prestige is the most important. The loss of face occurs when an individual, or those closely associated with them, fails to fulfil the fundamental expectations imposed upon them due to the social roles they occupy (Ho 1976). For instance, criticism is not appreciated in Chinese culture since it challenges another's authority and can cause the other to lose face (Guo 2013). On the other hand, giving someone face involves avoiding open disagreement or confrontation in order to prevent awkwardness and maintain harmonious social relationships (Zhu and O'Sullivan 2020).

Regarding Chinese students taking different courses at UK universities, research suggests that they tend to be more sensitive to their status within a group, especially when their thoughts differ from those of the group. Fear of making language errors or saying something inappropriate often leads them to internalise their thoughts rather than articulate ideas openly (Jin 1992). Meanwhile, the strong desire to avoid losing face further reinforces this tendency (Jin 1992; DuPraw and Axner 1997; Huang 1999), as open disagreement may be seen as embarrassing or disrespectful (DuPraw and Axner 1997; Zhu and O'Sullivan 2020). To prevent potential conflicts, they prioritise face-saving strategies, which ultimately contribute to lower classroom participation and increased silence in discussions (Lin and Yi 1997; DuPraw and Axner 1997; Wu and Hammond 2011; Ryan 2012; Wang 2018a; Zhu and O'Sullivan 2020).

Therefore, research argues that it's a misconception to assume Chinese students are unwilling to participate or lack critical thinking skills in class (Ryan 2012; Heng 2019; Qu and Song 2024). They may know how to think critically but prefer to conduct debates quietly to avoid public conflict. Ryan (2012, p.284) provides an example of a Chinese school's reference for its top student applying to a UK university, praising them as "the most modest student the school has ever seen." In this context, "modest" is a valued trait, meaning that good students in China are encouraged to reflect on themselves rather than criticise others.

*d) Transition to a low context-based learning environment*

Another difference in the learning environment is the low-context based learning in the UK and the high-context based learning in China. According to Hall (1990), a context-based environment refers to how communication is shaped by the surrounding context, including cultural, social, and situational factors. In high-context cultures like China, communication is indirect, and information is filtered through subjective perspectives. On the other hand, in low-context cultures like the UK, communication is direct and relies on clear verbal skills. In China, students gain knowledge through close relationships and networks (Ryan 2010; Chang 2021). However, students in Western countries acquire information through detailed and explicit communication (Liu et al. 2010; Guo 2013; Chang 2021). This difference presents particular challenges for Chinese international students, studying at all levels in the UK, especially in written and verbal communication with their instructors.

*1) Clear and logical academic writing*

Writing in a different language presents challenges not only in terms of language proficiency but also in navigating different cultural assumptions. In China, even with argumentative writing, narrative writing with beautiful language and difficult terms was

privileged over argumentative points, while in English-speaking countries, rationality and innovative ideas were much more appreciated (Heng 2019), where argumentative essays and strict logic were preferred. Some British tutors have observed that their Chinese students tend to be less direct in articulating their ideas and providing supporting evidence (Jin 1992). For example, a Chinese international student's essay, written in English, may be grammatically correct but include euphuistic language that is ornamental and expressive, but may not necessarily be clearly and logically organised. This can lead to the British academics misapprehending the meaning of the student's work, which in turn can lead to that student receiving a low mark on that assignment.

## 2) *Interpersonal relationship with teachers*

Moreover, in a high-context culture like China, interpersonal relationships are more intimate. Teachers are seen as elders and mentors, guiding students not only academically but also in their personal lives. On the other hand, lecturers in UK universities typically maintain boundaries in personal matters, and the student-teacher relationship is generally less close (Wang 2018a; Holliman et al. 2024; Gao 2024). For example, one British English teacher in China described the teacher-student bond outside the classroom as the “absolute polar opposite” of what it is inside, noting that it is much more personal than the student-teacher relationship typically seen in the UK, where there is a clear boundary between professional and personal life. In China, teachers are regarded as “masters” who offer guidance in all aspects of life, and this relationship is viewed similarly to that of “parents and children” (Hutchinson 2015).

In addition to the above, recent research on Chinese international students has also addressed their experiences of racism and psychological wellbeing during periods of isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the early outbreak (Lai et al. 2021) and the UK lockdown (Yen et al. 2021; Wang 2020). However, limited research has examined Chinese international students' experiences during the post-pandemic

period, coinciding with the initial introduction of blended learning in UK universities.

Furthermore, existing literature tends to focus on their initial adjustment to new academic environments, often emphasising short-term adaptation strategies. While some longitudinal studies explore longer-term adjustment and acculturation of Chinese PGT students (e.g. Brown and Holloway 2008; Chien 2015; Quan et al. 2016), they frequently reflect a critical view of internationalisation, in which success is framed as conformity to Western academic norms (Mittelmeier et al. 2024). This focus may overlook how students' learning experiences evolve and develop over time in the new environment, especially for PGT students, who often face intensified challenges during their cross-cultural transitions.

## **2.2 Learning theories**

Most learning theories applied to understanding internationalism in higher education settings adopt a social constructivist perspective, as many studies view international student experiences as transitional processes between different social contexts (e.g. Gu et al. 2010; Schartner 2014; Liu 2023). Social constructivism emphasises the role of social interaction, culture, and context in learning and meaning-making. It also provides a key epistemological foundation for many contemporary learning theories. For this research, a multilayered theoretical framework related to learning experiences was employed to analyse the data. The first, and foundational, layer is social constructivism.

The second layer drew on Dewey's theories of experience and educative experiences, providing a conceptual framework for understanding learning that aligns with many other more contemporary approaches. For instance, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979; 1994; 1999) also emphasises the role of experience and environment in development, resonating philosophically with Dewey's ideas. This theory is further expanded by Jones (2017), who identifies seven key microsystems

influencing the undergraduate student experience in higher education, offering a framework for broader learning and personal development. However, its applicability to postgraduate contexts remains uncertain, as it was originally developed for undergraduate populations. In addition to emphasising the role of environment in learning, other contemporary frameworks resonate with Dewey's ideas on the continuity and development of the individual. One such perspective is the concept of rhizomatic transitions, first introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and later applied to higher education by Gravett (2019). This approach reinterprets student transitions through three interconnected dimensions: transitions as troublesome, rhizomatic, and becoming. It challenges linear and normative views of the student journey, instead highlighting the fluid, complex, and evolving nature of learners' identities (Gravett 2019; Balloo et al. 2021). It enriches Dewey's notion of experience, particularly by emphasising transaction and continuity as the processes through which growth occurs.

The third layer of the theoretical framework was Mezirow's transformative learning theory (TLT), rooted in critical pedagogical perspectives that have greatly enhanced the understanding of international students' learning experiences. Alongside TLT, concept such as hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy has been widely applied to examine these experiences (e.g., Madge et al. 2009; Nada and Legutko 2022; López Murillo 2021). These frameworks highlight the significance of critical reflection, learner agency, and identity development, particularly in contexts characterised by cultural and academic dissonance.

The following section explores these three theoretical perspectives in greater detail, with particular attention to their relevance in cross-cultural educational contexts. Further discussion of how this integrated framework is applied within the present study is provided in Chapter 3.

### ***2.2.1 Constructivism and social constructivism in education***

#### *i. Learning via reflection on experiences*

Constructivism in education, as “an epistemological way of learning” (Akar 2003, p.29), is a theory that posits individuals actively construct their own understanding and knowledge through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. It emphasises more on the internal cognitive process of the individual. Experiences refer to an individual’s past encounters and events; while reflection denotes how these past experiences influence and shape present understanding, ideas, and beliefs.

This theory comes from psychologist Jean Piaget’s work on cognitive development. Piaget (1967) defines cognitive development as the gradual improvement of thinking skills, influenced by both biological growth and experiences in the environment. Therefore, children build their understanding of the world by experiencing and reconciling differences between what they know and what they encounter.

As children mature and interact with the world, their mental processes reorganise and become more advanced through critical reflection on past experiences for learning (Freire 1970; Mezirow 1991). Learning for adults is a process that involves a back-and-forth interaction between pre-existing knowledge and new experiences wherein individuals critically reflect on their past experiences and subsequently alter or generate new interpretations of meaning (Mezirow 1991). Individual learning occurs through praxis, which is a combination of reflection, action, and theoretical knowledge of the world to bring about change (Freire 1970).

In educational settings, constructivism considers that knowledge is co-constructed by the teacher and students through interaction as an effective process of teaching and learning (Sims et al. 2001). Therefore, constructivism highlights the importance of allowing learners to develop their own interpretations and arguments based on prior

knowledge through active engagement with the world, such as experiments or real-world problem-solving (McLeod 2024).

*ii. Learning via social interaction*

While Piaget's theory and constructivism are mainly focused on an individual's internal cognitive development, Vygotsky's (1978) theory of cognitive development promotes social interaction as the external factor of learning. The theory of social constructivism was developed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development, which suggests that learning is shaped by cultural and social factors (Vygotsky 1978; Cherry 2022). Social constructivism posits that learning fundamentally involves engaging with others in one's surroundings, rendering it a cultural phenomenon wherein individuals from different cultures adopt diverse learning styles (Vygotsky 1978). Therefore, social constructivism in education is an extension, or development, of constructivism, which focuses on the collaborative nature of learning.

Cognitive development occurs through interactions with individuals possessing greater knowledge or skills than the learner. Integral to a child's learning is the interaction with a proficient tutor, often a parent or teacher. The child seeks to comprehend the tutor's actions or instructions, subsequently internalising this information to guide and regulate their own performance (Vygotsky 1978; McLeod 2024).

*a) Sociocultural context*

While Vygotsky's social constructivism emphasises the interaction between learners and more capable others, other scholars highlight the importance of the surrounding environment in the learning process (Dewey 1934; Freire 1970; Bronfenbrenner 1979). Learning is a process of deriving meaning through experiences, where educative experiences are constructed through active engagement with both physical and social environments (Dewey 1934; 1938). Meanwhile, knowledge is shaped by interactions

within complex and overlapping environmental systems, including family, school, community, and society (Bronfenbrenner 1979). An individual's reflection on their own experiences, in relation to the surrounding sociocultural context, can help ensure that shared knowledge and meanings within a social group are sustained over time (Dewey 1938). In other words, knowledge is not solely formed within an individual's mind; it is constructed through social interactions where people exchange, build, and reshape ideas (Akar 2003).

*b) Dialogue*

Dialogue is another key concept in learning within social constructivism. Vygotsky (1978) emphasises that cognitive development arises through collaborative interactions with more knowledgeable members of society, with language serving as a primary cultural tool for mediating thinking and facilitating the acquisition of knowledge. He further suggests that children acquire cultural values, beliefs and skills via collaborative dialogues with these more knowledgeable others (MKOs). Through talking with MKOs, those with greater expertise or understanding in a specific area, children not only gain more information and skills but also enhance their higher-order mental functions, like formal reasoning (Vygotsky 1978; McLeod 2024).

Dialogue is essential for adult learning, as it enables individuals to challenge and revise their existing assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives, which influence how they make sense of experiences and information. Freire (1970, p. 88) emphasises that dialogue is "indispensable" to learning, describing it as the process through which people come together to "name the world" by critically engaging with their socio-cultural realities. Building on this, Mezirow (1991) argues that transformative learning in adults depends not only on critical reflection but also on discourse. Discourse, a specific form of dialogue, serves as a means to seek common understanding and evaluate interpretations or beliefs, allowing actions to be coordinated towards shared goals (Mezirow 2000).

Through such engagement, individuals come to better understand how others interpret their experiences and the reasoning behind those interpretations. In other words, dialogue serves as the foundation for uncovering shared realities and initiating meaningful learning, as it enables individuals to make sense of their world through collaborative reflection and understanding..

Like constructivism, social constructivism also advocates for collaborative work between students and teachers in the process of knowledge building. However, it places greater emphasis on joint learning for both teachers and students. The teacher should co-create meaning with students, fostering a dialogue that enhances the learning experience.

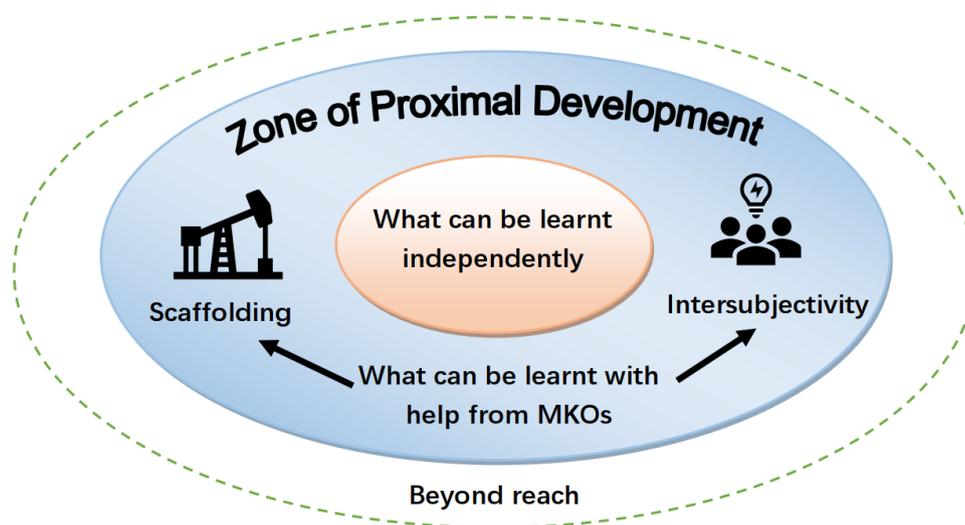
*iii. The learning process under the sociocultural theory of cognitive development*

The following sections will explore how cognitive development unfolds through interaction with others, drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. While aligned with social constructivism, it places greater emphasis on the role of cultural tools in shaping learning within specific social contexts (Cole and Wertsch 1996). This perspective is particularly important to understanding international students' experiences in the foreign countries, as they often navigate unfamiliar cultural and academic tools while constructing knowledge in a different sociocultural environment.

*a) MKOs and ZPDs*

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development introduces the interconnected concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The ZPD defines the gap between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can learn with guidance (Vygotsky 1978). MKOs play a crucial role in this process, referring to individuals with greater knowledge or skills, who may be older, peers, or even younger but more experienced (Vygotsky 1978; Cherry 2022; McLeod 2024).

Therefore, engaging in social interaction with MKOs promotes cognitive development within the ZPD, leading to enhanced reasoning. This process involves two key aspects: intersubjectivity and scaffolding. Intersubjectivity occurs when two individuals with different understandings of a task reach a shared understanding by adjusting to each other's perspectives. Scaffolding starts with direct instruction from MKOs, which is gradually reduced as the learner gains proficiency (Vygotsky 1978; McLeod 2024). This ZPD learning process, shown in Figure 2.2, highlights how interaction through intersubjectivity and scaffolding helps bridge the gap between actual and potential learning.



*Figure 2.2 ZPD learning process in sociocultural theory of cognitive development*

Due to Vygotsky's premature death, parts of this theory remain incomplete (Allman 2020). For example, he provides only a vague definition of social interaction and does not explicitly outline the most effective method for engagement (Kurt 2020). Another key constraint is linked to the vagueness of the ZPD, failing to provide a precise understanding of an individual's learning needs, current capability level, learning style, and motivational influences (Ameri 2020).

#### *b) Cultural tools*

Vygotsky's theory (1978) also emphasises that cognitive processes are shaped by cultural tools, arguing that the mind is inherently linked to culture and cannot exist independently. The content of learning varies depending on the culture and society an individual interacts with. For example, children's cognitive development in one culture may differ significantly from that in another. Each culture provides intellectual tools that enhance fundamental mental functions, promoting advanced cognitive abilities such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity. These tools of intellectual adaptation are internalised through social interactions with MKOs. Vygotsky (1978) also suggests that individual cognitive functions are shaped by the cultural beliefs, values, and intellectual tools of one's developmental context (Cherry 2022; McLeod 2024). Therefore, international students may approach thinking and learning differently from local peers, having developed within distinct cultural environments.

However, the sociocultural theory may not universally apply to all social and cultural groups, as these groups are not homogeneous, and not all learners may interpret engagement in the same way (Rogoff 1990; Allman 2020; Ameri 2020).

#### *iv. The critiques of social constructivism*

While social constructivism has been influential, it has received several critical challenges. One major criticism is that it neglects the role of the individual in favour of the social and collective role in the learning process (Resnick 1996; Ameri 2020). Especially for Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which could potentially downplay the influence of individual factors and biological aspects, limiting its ability to fully capture the complexity of cognitive processes.

Another criticism focuses on the emphasis on active learning in both constructivism and social constructivism. These theories value the active process of connecting prior

knowledge with new insights, rejecting passive approaches of teaching and learning. For example, both Dewey (1938) and Freire (1970) argue that if learners only passively receive information without engaging deeply in critical reflection, they are unlikely to meaningfully adapt, revise, or construct new knowledge and habits. Critics argue that social constructivism may too quickly dismiss passive perception and memorisation in learning, suggesting that surface learning is not always of poor quality and can sometimes be meaningful (Hirsch 1987; Fox 2001).

Despite its limitations, social constructivism made significant contributions to the understanding of cognitive development, particularly by emphasising the vital roles of social interaction and cultural context in learning. This perspective is especially relevant to understanding the learning experiences of international students. Therefore, it served as the first layer of the theoretical framework in this study, providing the foundation for defining how learning occurs.

### ***2.2.2 Experience and educative experience***

Although Dewey's theory is widely applied in primary education, it was not originally developed specifically for schools. Rather, his ideas address how human beings learn based on their experiences (Landorf and Wadley 2022). As discussed earlier, they align closely with several contemporary learning theories. Given that the data collected in this study pertained to the experiences of international student, Dewey's theory of experience and educative experience offered a valuable framework for conceptualising both their learning experiences and the quality of their experiences in various academic activities. This section will explore Dewey's conceptualisation of experience and how individuals interact with their environment to foster growth through these experiences.

i. *Experience and an experience*

a) *Experience: a product organism-environment interaction*

According to Dewey (1934), experience is a product of the organism in close continuous, interaction with their environment. It is a transaction taking place between an individual and their surroundings as experience does not “occur in vacuum” (Dewey 1938, p.40). Dewey’s concept of experience is founded on two essential criteria: continuity and transaction. Continuity suggests that experience unfolds as an ongoing process, while transaction highlights the dynamic interaction between living beings and their surrounding environment, integral to the act of living itself (Dewey 1934; 1938).

Just as living beings sustain themselves by continuous renewal, our experiences endure through constant renewal as well. This involves not only physical rejuvenation but also the renewal of our beliefs, hopes, feelings, and actions. This renewal process happens within our social groups, ensuring that our shared experiences continue over time (Dewey 1916). We are affected by our experiences, which shape how we feel and influence our preferences and aversions. This influences how we navigate future experiences and shapes the situations in which they occur. Each experience not only impacts our thoughts and feelings but also affects our physical selves, socio-cultural perceptions, sensations, and relationships. It is an all-encompassing process that shapes every facet of our lives (Dewey 1938).

Our experiences shape our preferences, emotions, and interactions, influencing how we approach future situations and affecting our thoughts, bodies, and social perceptions (Dewey 1938). For this study, Dewey’s theory of experience helped conceptualise international students’ experiences of transition as a continual renewal of their beliefs, emotions, and actions within varying social and cultural contexts.

In summary, general experiences encompass our everyday activities and feelings, which

are continuous and interconnected. However, not all experiences qualify as “an experience” or an “educative experience,” as will be explored in the following section.

*b) An experience: standing out in the flow of experiences*

An experience, according to Dewey (1916), is a complete, standout event that is more structured and memorable, marked by a clear beginning and end, and carries significant meaning or impact. Distinct from general experience, which has no clear direction towards fulfilment, an experience runs its course to consummation, denoting a sense of fulfilment.

First, an experience, whether small or significant, starts with an impulsion (Dewey 1934). It begins with an initial stimulus that prompts us to express ourselves. When resistance hinders this expression, it causes us to pause, reflect, and consider the situation. At this stage, we draw on our past experiences to understand and overcome the obstacle. This process of reflection, in turn, strengthens the initial impulse, making our actions more deliberate and purposeful.

Second, an experience has a unifying pervasive quality, in other words, it is marked by a sense of coherence and consistency throughout. Even when composed of different parts, it remains a coherent and complete event. Therefore, in an experience, each part flows smoothly into the next without gaps or breaks, creating a clear and continuous progression. Each phase builds on the previous one, making each part distinct while enriching the overall experience (Dewey 1934).

Finally, an experience begins with an initial impulse and progresses with continuity, gradually building toward a point of fulfilment or culmination. This culmination represents a peak moment where all elements of the experience converge, creating a sense of completion and satisfaction (Dewey 1934). It is the moment when the entire experience gains coherence and meaning. The various parts of the experience, from

impulses to interactions and reflections, integrate to form a unified whole that shapes the individual and influences their future development.

ii. *Aesthetics and experiences*

The word aesthetic differs from artistic. While the latter refers to the process of creating art, “aesthetic” relates to the perception and enjoyment of art (Dewey 1934, p.44). Dewey’s work on aesthetics is deeply influenced by his pragmatic philosophy, suggesting that the quality of art is not merely in what is produced or appreciated but also in the experience of producing and appreciating it (Shusterman 2010). He proposes that practical activities, such as cooking or gardening, can have an aesthetic quality. Any experience involving appreciation, perception, and enjoyment can be considered aesthetic. Dewey aims to bridge the gap between the special and intense experiences of art, such as those encountered in museums and galleries, and everyday experiences (Alexander 2016). As Dewey (1934, p.14) asserts, every experience is “capable of aesthetic quality.”

a) *The aesthetic quality of experiences and aesthetic experiences*

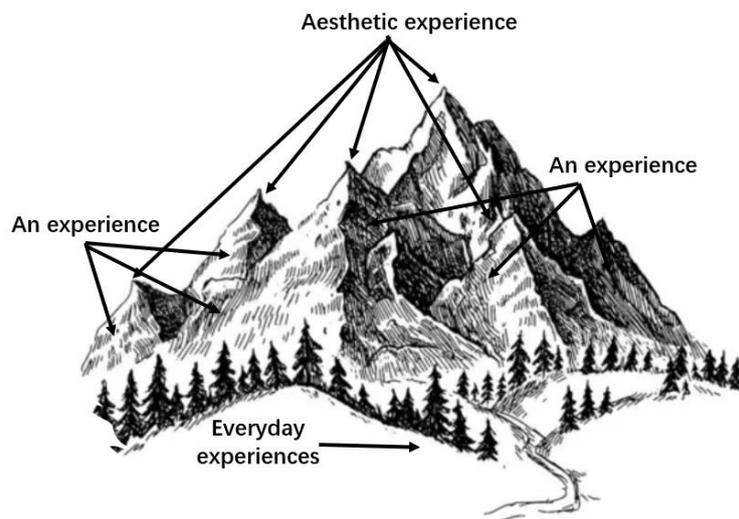
Several philosophers have explored the expansive role of aesthetics in human experience, emphasising how it shapes our engagement with the world and demonstrating that aesthetics is not confined to art but extends to everyday interactions and perceptions (Whitehead 1929; Dewey 1934; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Heidegger 1971). Among them, Dewey (1934) points out that “aesthetics” is a philosophical concept fundamentally connected to the quality and process of experiences.

The aesthetic quality of an experience distinguishes it by creating coherence and completeness, whether intellectual or practical. It unites all elements into a meaningful whole, providing a sense of fulfilment at its conclusion. Dewey (1934) explains that this unity renders an experience complete, so any well-structured activity aimed at a

conclusion may possess aesthetic quality. In essence, the effective integration of each element makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Different from the aesthetic quality of experience, an aesthetic experience represents its highest form, allowing us to engage with something in its best and fullest sense (Dewey 1934). It's during these moments that we feel most alive and fully engaged (English and Doddington 2019). It is in these moments that we experience true completeness and fulfilment with a deep sense of satisfaction, which could have a lasting impact on how we perceive and engage with the world.

As shown in Figure 2.3, everyday experiences can be compared to valleys and foothills, which are the foundation. An experience with an aesthetic quality stands out like high mountains, with aesthetic experiences standing at the peak. These peaks symbolise the most fulfilling moments, rising from everyday experiences. Just as mountains depend on valleys and foothills, aesthetic experiences are rooted in and enriched by the flow of ordinary experiences.



*Figure 2.3 Illustration of an experience and aesthetic experience*

*b) The aesthetic quality of thinking*

Dewey (1938, p.81) states that thinking involves taking a pause before acting, echoing the old phrase “stop and think”. During the pause, we control our impulses by combining (present) observation with what we remember from (past) memory. It also provides an opportunity to explore possible actions and consider how they relate to the initial impulse, which marks the beginning of an experience. This process makes reflection possible.

Dewey also emphasises that reflection on experience is fundamental to learning, which fosters growth, which will be discussed later. Reflection and judgment, in turn, enable us to remake or reshape our impulses, which also involves the inhibition of impulses in the first place. Instead of acting on them right away, we could create a more thoughtful and well-organised plan of action.

As per Dewey (1934), thinking possesses its own aesthetic quality, akin to engaging with art. While art uses tangible materials, thinking utilises signs and symbols. This well-organised and cohesive process makes thinking emotionally fulfilling. It also motivates intellectual inquiry and ensures completeness in intellectual activities. This suggests that international students’ intellectual engagement at UK universities may similarly embody an aesthetic quality, enriching and completing their academic experiences.

*iii. Educative experience and growth*

Having explored Dewey’s definition, structure, and completeness of experience, this section examines his views on the interplay between education and experience, considers how experiences foster individual growth, and concludes by contrasting educative and miseducative experiences, highlighting their significance for globalised learning.

*a) Education and experience*

*1) Education, society and individual experience*

Dewey (1916, p.6) defines education as the “means of social continuity of life”, therefore, education enables us to renew ourselves, our communities, and society, guiding continuous growth in the right direction. Even though individual people eventually die, the knowledge and experiences they have passed on through the continuous interaction with their environment and its socio-cultural milieu help keep society alive and continuous.

As previously mentioned, Dewey (1916) defines experience as the process through which individuals interact with their environment, therefore, experience is not simply a passive event that happens to individuals, but an active and dynamic process of engagement with the world. Dewey emphasises that experiences have a significant quality as they continuously influence the present and future experiences of individuals and society.

Hence, Dewey (1938, p.25) considers education and experience are intrinsically linked, declaring that the one permanent frame of experience is the “organic connection between education and personal experiences.” All genuine education comes about through experience, a process facilitated by reflections from learners upon their past encounters that enable them to construct meaning and understanding in current and future experiences. It is only through the actual life experiences of individuals that education can achieve its goals for both the learner and society.

*2) Traditional education and progressive education*

Dewey (1938) advocates progressive education over the traditional education of his time. In traditional education, knowledge is imposed by teachers onto learners, and what has been imposed is external discipline. Learning is seen as the acquisition of

information already contained in books and the minds of teachers. It focuses on obtaining isolated skills and techniques through drills, preparing learners for a distant future, and adhering to static aims and materials. On the other hand, progressive education focuses on gaining knowledge as the expression and cultivation of individuality through free activity. It emphasises learning through experiences and teaching skills based on each individual's context. Therefore, education prepares learners for the opportunities of present life by ensuring that teaching evolves to meet the demands of a changing world.

As mentioned in Chapter 2.2.1, critics argue that Dewey promotes a style of teaching that avoids rote memorisation (Hirsch 1987), which could compromise academic rigour. By prioritising experience over traditional academic content, students may miss out on acquiring essential knowledge and skills needed for success in structured academic environments or assessments (Ravitch 2000). Furthermore, this approach risks neglecting the structured, disciplinary understanding required to ensure equal opportunities for students to critically engage with society and address systemic inequalities (Young 2014).

*b) Growth and experience*

Growth, to Dewey (1916; 1934; 1938), is how humans develop by learning from their experiences (through education) and interactions (with the environment). As referenced before, organisms sustain themselves by continually renewing and utilising surrounding energy and resources; their change over a lifetime via interaction with the environment could be defined as growth (Dewey 1916; English and Doddington 2019). This is how Dewey defines biological growth: we naturally grow and change as we live our lives biologically. Dewey (1916, p.47) also highlights growth through education, stating that education is a process of growth because it gives us an inherent energy, which he describes as the “ability to develop.”

As part of his discussion of growth, Dewey emphasises two traits of immaturity: plasticity and dependence. Dewey refers to plasticity as the dimension of growth that describes the human ability to learn by taking in new and unexpected objects or ideas from our environment, considering them, and responding to our aims and desires. By using the term dependence to describe our need for others, Dewey argues against the popular belief of his time that growth ends in maturity as a state of independence; instead, it is to aid further growth and remain a constructive aspect of being human (Dewey 1916; English and Doddington 2019).

*c) Learning and educative experience*

*1) Learning via experiences*

Learning is the process of gaining meaning through experience, which, according to Dewey (1916, p.294), involves the dynamic interplay of “doing” and “undergoing.”. While “doing” refers to individual’s active engagement in an experience, “undergoing” captures the simultaneous way that individual is affected by the environment. These two are inseparable aspects of every experience, forming the basis of transaction.

Experience accumulates over time and becomes richer as we explore the various connections between ourselves and the world (Dewey 1916). In other words, by connecting ourselves to the environment around us, we can make the experience more meaningful through deeper and more active engagement, ultimately promoting growth. This process, in turn, fosters plasticity, which is the ability to adapt and reshape our understanding of the world. It also promotes dependence, as learning occurs in social contexts where interaction and discourse are essential.

Learning through experience, therefore, is not simply about adding new information to what we already know; it involves reconstructing our understanding based on prior learning (Dewey 1934). This explanation of experience further conceptualised the

learning experiences of international students for this study, which involved continuous reflection on prior knowledge and transformation of understanding as they engage with new academic and cultural contexts.

## 2) *Educative and miseducative experience*

The two principles of experiences, continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned, are not separate but intersect and unite. The principle of continuity of experience means that each experience is shaped by what came before it and influences how we understand things in the future. Every experience is a “moving force” (Dewey 1938, p.38), shaping the direction we take and influencing who we become. The interaction of experiences refers to the interplay of environmental factors with the internal conditions of the learner. Experience “does not occur in a vacuum” and is “ultimately social”, which involves contact and communication with others (Dewey 1938, p.40).

The two principles can be seen as the dimensions of experience: continuity refers to how experiences are connected and build upon each other over time (longitudinal), while interaction refers to how experiences relate to and are shaped by the world around us (lateral). When these two principles work together actively, they determine how meaningful and valuable an experience is for learning and personal growth (Dewey 1938).

As per Dewey’s theory (1938), the experiences that promote growth, foster further learning and enhance the individuals’ ability to engage meaningfully with their environment, are educative. Not all experiences are equally educative to learning. Some are miseducative, as they hinder or negatively alter the learning process. Hence, the formerly referenced aesthetic experience, in its fullest sense, involves resistance, exploration, and completion, fostering growth and thus being educative (English and Doddington 2019). That is to say, educative experiences are those that foster growth by

connecting present experiences to past ones and shaping future experiences, guiding development in a positive direction and contributing to sustained growth. As explained in Figure 2.4, past experiences serve as the foundation that shapes an individual's present experiences, where learning occurs through the interaction between internal conditions (such as emotions, thoughts, and desires) and external conditions (the environment). Continuity refers to the flow that connects past, present, and future experiences. Growth signifies development towards future experiences through an engagement with the environment that produces energy, or our ability to adapt and change. When a surplus of energy occurs, we grow. Educative experiences foster this growth, while miseducative ones hinder or alter it. In this case, Dewey's theory of educative experience and growth provided a valuable framework for conceptualising the quality of international students' experiences for this study.

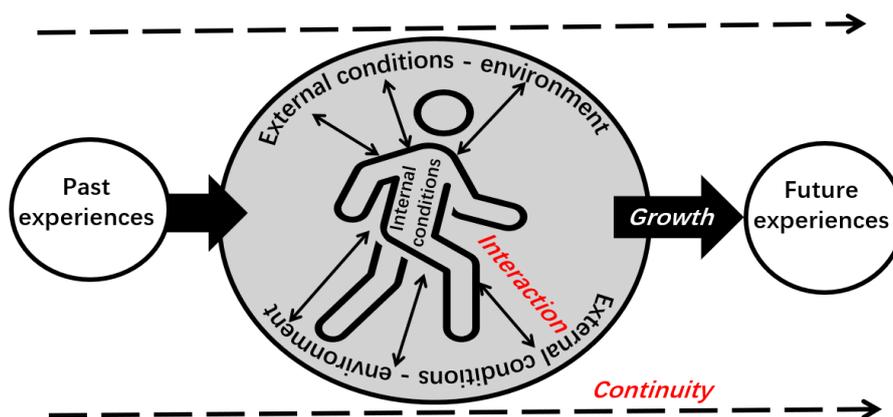


Figure 2.4 Educative experience based on Dewey's (1938) theory

d) *Critical perspectives on Dewey's theories of educative experience and growth*

Nevertheless, some critics argue that Dewey is overly optimistic about human rationality and the power of education, potentially overlooking the complexities of human behaviour (Hook 1985). For instance, Hirsch (1996) points out that Dewey's belief in the inherent goodness and effectiveness of unsupervised human growth and development is naive. In other words, Hirsch disagrees with Dewey, suggesting that it is unrealistic for individuals to progress positively on their own without structured

guidance or formal rules. However, Dewey also emphasises the importance of plasticity and dependency, concepts which inherently involve a form of supervision. In my opinion, this highlights Dewey's belief in the role of experienced individuals guiding those who are less experienced.

Another major critique of Dewey's theories focuses on his research methodology. Critics argue that his theories lack empirical evidence and are based on subjective observations. They highlight that Dewey's conclusions are derived more from philosophical reasoning than from large-scale, controlled research (Hirsch 1996). Moreover, the lack of systematic data collection raises concerns that conclusions based on subjective observations may be biased (Kliebard 1995); however, this criticism might overlook Dewey's unpublished notes and reports on the Laboratory School held at the University of Chicago (Tanner and Tanner 1995).

*iv. Dewey's theory and global learning in universities*

While Dewey's theories of experience have not been widely applied to the analysis of international students' experiences in higher education, they offer significant potential for conceptualising cross-cultural transitions in these settings. Existing literature has primarily drawn on Dewey in the context of global learning, where diverse learners collaboratively engage with transnational issues through reflective practice (e.g. English 2018; Landorf and Wadley 2021). For instance, his theory is often applied in international universities to foster collaboration among students from varied cultural and intellectual backgrounds as they address complex, cross-border challenges. His concept of reflective thinking plays a central role in this process, enabling learners to navigate diverse perspectives, manage complexity, and work toward meaningful, shared solutions (Landorf and Wadley 2021).

Although these applications highlight Dewey's relevance in globalised education, there

remains a gap in using his core concepts, particularly educative experience and growth, to examine international students' learning as they adapt to unfamiliar cultural and academic settings. This study therefore adopts Dewey's theory as the second layer of its theoretical framework, using it both to conceptualise cross-cultural transition as a dynamic, reconstructive process grounded in prior experience, and to analyse the quality and impact of those experiences.

### ***2.2.3 Transformative learning theory***

Mezirow (1978) first introduced the concept of transformative learning in 1978 and then developed and revised this theory over the next two decades. TLT has since been adopted by scholars across various disciplines. Even after more than thirty years, the theory continues to evolve (Lilley et al. 2015; Kitchenham 2018) and is regarded as a foundational theory in adult learning (Cox and John 2016).

Transformative learning, as defined by Mezirow (2000), involves reshaping one's taken-for-granted frames of reference into more open, flexible, and reflective perspectives, allowing for better-informed beliefs to guide actions. Introducing this theory requires understanding Mezirow's views on learning and knowledge acquisition, the transformative process itself, and its connection to the cultural transitions experienced by international students.

#### *i. Mezirow's understanding of learning*

##### *a) Making meaning as a learning process*

According to Mezirow (2012), thinking is an immediate, conscious psychological process, a "physical" action of the brain that enables humans to perform high-level intellectual activities. Interpretation, on the other hand, is an unconscious thinking process influenced by past experiences. Learning combines both processes, involving

a conscious effort to create or amend interpretations. As Mezirow (1991; 2012) describes, learning is the act of making meaning, and meaning is an interpretation. Learning involves a dialectical process of interpreting experiences, where individuals integrate what they already understand with new experiences. Consequently, adult learning emphasises understanding context by critically reflecting on assumptions and validating beliefs by examining underlying reasons. This process helps develop reliable beliefs and supports informed decision-making (Mezirow 2012).

*b) Meaning structures*

*1) Meaning perspectives and meaning schemes*

According to Mezirow (1991; 2000; 2003; 2012), individuals interpret their experiences through meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Transformative learning is the process of transforming these meaning schemes and perspectives into a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Meaning schemes, influenced by Piaget's concept of schemas (1952), help individuals interpret and respond to experiences. Piaget defines schemas as the "basic building blocks of intelligent behaviour," with adaptation occurring through assimilation (integrating new experiences into existing schemas) and accommodation (modifying schemas to fit new experiences). While Piaget's schemas focus on children's cognitive structures, Mezirow (1991; 2000) applies meaning schemes to adult learning, describing them as beliefs, concepts, feelings, and judgments that shape interpretation and can be transformed through reflection.

Meaning perspectives, on the other hand, are the foundational influences that shape how individuals perceive and interpret the world (Mezirow 1991; Fleming 2018), formed by a combination of an individual's psychological makeup and cultural environment. These meaning perspectives act as the background for one's thinking

process.

To clarify, meaning perspectives are more comprehensive and provide a framework for interpreting our experiences, whereas meaning schemes are more specific cognitive structures that operate within this broader framework.

## 2) *Frame of reference*

A frame of reference is a meaning perspective that shapes how individuals interpret their current experiences and discussions (Mezirow 1991; 2000). It represents a habitual set of expectations that forms a guiding framework for projecting ideas, also serving as a “belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experiences” (Mezirow 1991, p. 41). Therefore, our frames of reference often reflect cultural norms or personal influences from our caregivers, as well as various “intentionally or incidentally learned philosophical, economic, sociological, and psychological orientations or theories” (Mezirow 2012, p. 83).

Frames of reference encompass two dimensions: habits of mind and points of view. Habits of mind involve assumptions, broad generalisations, and predispositions that filter how we interpret the meaning of experience. Points of view are the specific perspectives through which habits of mind are expressed (Mezirow 2000; Fleming 2018).

Figure 2.5 illustrates the relationships between the concepts involved in the learning process, as outlined in TLT (Mezirow 2000), based on Kitchenham’s (2018) study on the evolution of the theory.

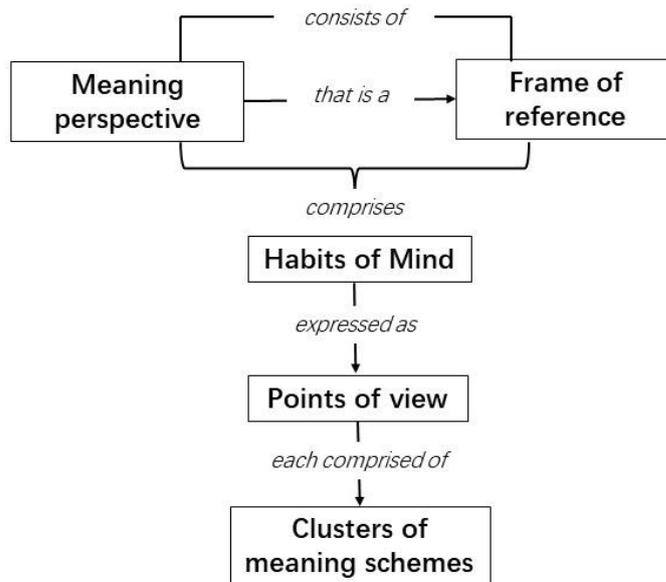


Figure 2.5 Concepts in Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory

ii. *Transformative learning*

a) *Transformations and transformative learning*

According to Mezirow (2012), learning occurs in four ways: by expanding existing frames of reference; by acquiring new frames of reference; by transforming points of view; and by transforming habits of mind. The concept of transformation involves gradually reshaping deeply held perspectives or mental habits, leading to significant changes in how individuals interpret and engage with their experiences. Therefore, this process itself could become a new frame of reference to influence how we interpret our experiences in the future.

Transformations in habits of mind can be either epochal or incremental (Mezirow 2012): the transformation could be triggered by a sudden or dramatic event or a series of smaller changes that eventually lead to a significant shift in one's meaning-making process. Using an example of incremental transformation of international students: when an international student from an Eastern culture first arrives at a Western

university, they might be surprised to see students addressing professors by their first names rather than using their formal titles and family names. Over time, as the student interacts more with professors and engages in tutorials, they may gradually adjust their views on student-teacher relationships, challenging the assumptions they previously took for granted.

Therefore, transformative learning involves changing a problematic frame of reference to make it more reliable in adulthood by generating more justified opinions and interpretations. Frames of reference are then transformed via three avenues: content, process, and premise. In simpler terms, this encompasses how individuals articulate their viewpoints, actions, and propositions that serve as the foundation for argumentation, theory, or course of action. The process of transformative learning, indeed, is to transform what was used to be taken for granted to make them more open, flexible, and reflective, so it could be more beneficial for people to solve problems in adulthood (Mezirow 1990; 1996; 2012).

*b) Critical reflection*

The first essential element of transformative learning is critical reflection, which involves reviewing what has been said, done, or assumed, and then altering or generating new interpretations of meaning. For transformative learning, it is important to become critically aware of the hidden assumptions and expectations we hold and those of others. As adults, making informed decisions involves not only understanding the origins of our beliefs but also critically examining the assumptions behind them. This critical awareness is key to deeper and more meaningful learning and decision-making (Mezirow 2012).

*c) Reflective discourse (dialogue)*

The other requirement for transformative learning is reflective discourse. Discourse

refers to an active dialogue with others to understand the meaning of an experience (Mezirow 2000; 2012). To fully grasp how others interpret experiences, we need discourse. This involves critically reflecting on both their assumptions and our own. Reflective discourse helps clarify understanding by drawing on collective experiences. Its purpose is to find a common understanding and evaluate the validity of beliefs. Mezirow (2012, p.80) further points out that discourse is not about “winning arguments,” but about finding common ground, embracing different perspectives and views, and discovering connections and balance in opposing views. It also involves combining and reframing ideas and viewpoints. In transformative learning, discourse is a process that helps individuals fully understand how others interpret experiences and assess the reasons behind those interpretations.

It is also worth noting that Mezirow (2012) also sees discourse as a means for individuals to find their voice, but his view is different compared to Freire’s. While Freire (1970) regards dialogue as a tool for revolutionary changes in social structures and relationships, Mezirow considers it a way to bridge paradoxes and reconcile conflicting internal, external, and relational realities through reflective discourse. In other words, transformative learning is liberating both personally and socially. While Freire’s approach incorporates social justice into transformative learning, Mezirow views it primarily as a personal experience.

d) *Ten phases of transformative learning*

Mezirow (2000, p.22) outlines ten steps learners typically go through to achieve transformative learning (as shown in Table 2.2). These steps involve critical reflection and discourse, ultimately leading to a change in frames of reference. Here are the ten steps:

*Table 2.2 Mezirow's (2000) ten phases of transformative learning*

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Phase 1	A disorienting dilemma
Phase 2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
Phase 3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
Phase 4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6	Planning of a course of action
Phase 7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
Phase 8	Provisional trying of new roles
Phase 9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Phase 10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

---

Mezirow (2012) further explains that a mindful transformation learning experience happens when the learner thoughtfully decides to act on their reflective insight. This can lead to immediate action, delayed action, or reaffirming an existing approach. Also, a true transformation is not just about having the will to change or understand the need for change; it is also about having the ability to take action to turn these intentions into reality.

Like Dewey (1938), who believes that experience does not occur in a vacuum, Mezirow (2012) emphasises that critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action in the transformative learning process also do not happen in isolation. They take place in the real world, within complex social, cultural and interpersonal settings. These factors greatly affect the possibilities of transformative learning and shape its nature.

*iii. Cross-cultural transition and transformative learning*

*a) Cross-cultural transition and its transformative potential*

Literature suggests that exposure to a new culture has “transformative potential” (Brown 2009; p.504); therefore, cross-cultural experiences constitute transformative

learning settings (Taylor 1994; Etmanski 2007; Morgan 2010; Ritz 2010; Kasworm and Bowles 2012; Kumi-Yeboah 2014; Nada et al. 2018; Liu 2023).

Individuals embedded in a specific society, culture, and era absorb its perspectives and stereotypes into their frame of reference, influencing their attitudes, expectations, and interpretations of experiences (Mezirow 2012). Therefore, when individuals leave their original culture to be exposed to a new culture, they do not only cross geographic borders but also social-cultural ones (Webb 2015). Their initial expectations, shaped by their original culture, cannot be applied to the host environment, leading to the realisation that the people around them think and behave differently (Taylor 1994; Etmanski 2007).

This exposure to a new culture may bring about a disorienting dilemma (Etmanski 2007; Cranton and Kasl 2012), similar to culture shock (Taylor 1994; Morgan, 2010), which is caused by “one’s efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one’s presuppositions” (Mezirow 1990, p. 13). Therefore, cross-cultural transition can trigger a change in an individual’s meaning perspective, leading to transformation as they adapt to a new environment, making sense of new experiences with a more critical view, and expanding their original frames of reference to be more inclusive of intercultural encounters in their daily lives (Taylor 2008; Ritz 2010).

#### *b) Transformative learning theory and international students*

For international students, entering a different cultural context for learning can expose them to various unfamiliarities, compelling them to question their long-established frames of reference (Nada et al. 2018). By immersing oneself in diverse cultural and academic settings, there are significant opportunities for both epochal and incremental of transformative learning (Mezirow 2000; Ritz 2010).

Researchers claim that Mezirow’s TLT is beneficial as a theoretical framework for

studies on international students (Taylor, 1994; Foronda and Belknap 2012), as it encompasses the process of transformation caused by studying abroad, as noted by several studies (e.g. Ruddock and Turner 2007; Ritz 2010; Foronda and Belknap 2012; Cranton and Ka Jones 2013; Nada et al. 2018; Liu 2023). Studies reveal that intercultural transformation goes beyond acquiring knowledge and skills; it also involves transforming a person's identity (Kasworm and Bowles 2012; Kadianaki et al. 2015; Nada et al. 2018). Therefore, transformative learning for international students focuses more on how they learn and grow during their cross-cultural transition rather than just what they study (Kegan 2000; Berg 2007; Nada et al. 2018). Mezirow's TLT, in this case, effectively captures complex struggles and exploration international students face during cultural transitions, offering a valuable framework for examining their transformative experiences in higher education (Kumi-Yeboah 2014; Liu 2023).

Therefore, in this research, Mezirow's TLT was adopted as the third layer of the theoretical framework, as it focuses on the self-transformation of international students rather than their academic adjustment to a new cultural and institutional context. This perspective addresses a previously identified research gap, as most existing literature equates international student success with conformity to Western norms (Mittelmeier et al. 2024), often overlooking how their experiences develop over time. Furthermore, TLT complements the second layer of the framework. While Dewey's theory of experience helps to conceptualise how experience contributes to learning, TLT builds on this by providing a more systematic lens to examine experience as a process of personal transformation.

#### *iv. Critiques of transformative learning theory*

One major criticism of TLT is that it is more relevant to contemporary societies that share democratic values, such as rationality, democratic principles, and individual autonomy (Collard and Law 1989; Clark and Wilson 1991; Taylor 2000; Merriam and Mohamad 2000; Merriam and Ntseane 2008).

Critics argue that Mezirow's theory portrays transformation primarily as an individual process, focusing on how individuals learn to negotiate and act upon their own purposes, which particularly emphasises the interest of adult education in the West. Therefore, it could neglect the "constitutive relationship between individuals and the sociocultural, political, and historical contexts in which they are situated" (Clarke and Wilson 1991, p. 90).

Additionally, it is noted that TLT may not adequately consider the diverse cultural factors in which learning takes place (Alhadeff-Jones 2012; Taylor 2000; Merriam and Ntseane 2008), as it may overlook other cultural and social contexts where collective or different forms of understanding and decision-making are prevalent. Merriam and Ntseane (2008, p. 186) argue that "the theory is based largely on Western notions of individuality and rationality, which may not be fully applicable in non-Western contexts." For example, in a collectivist culture, interdependence may be valued more highly than individual autonomy (Merriam and Bierema 2014). This underscores a further limitation of transformative theory related to cultural context: it presupposes that all individuals have equal access to self-awareness and critical reflection, which may not be the case across different cultural or socioeconomic settings.

To explore the experiences of Chinese international students in cross-cultural transitions within higher education settings, it is essential to investigate their ongoing interaction with the environment. Therefore, this study incorporated social constructivist theories, particularly the sociocultural theory of cognitive development, to provide a framework for understanding how various environmental factors contributed to and influenced the transformative learning process of Chinese international students in the UK.

### **2.3 Chapter summary**

This chapter reviewed the literature relevant to this research. It began by exploring cross-cultural transitions within HEIs, with particular attention to students enrolled in PGT programmes, before examining the specific experiences of Chinese students in UK universities. The discussion also highlighted the differences between academic environments in China and the UK, providing a comparative context for understanding these transitions and identifying a gap in the existing literature.

The second part of the chapter introduced the learning theories that form the multilayered theoretical framework used to analyse and interpret the data in this study. It explained how these theories are interconnected to support an understanding of international students' experiences and how this framework helps to address the research gap.

The next chapter will outline the research methodology, explaining how the research questions were developed, the research paradigm adopted, the researcher's positionality, and how the learning theories were applied in practice.

## **Chapter 3 Research methodology**

In this chapter, I will explain how the research questions were formulated, the research paradigm was adopted for this research, and how the theoretical frameworks were used to guide both the development of the questions and the analysis of the data. This chapter, therefore, outlines the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research, which serves as a foundation for the specific research methods discussed in Chapter 4.

### **3.1 Research questions**

The initial objective of this research was to understand the learning experiences of Chinese international students on PGT courses in UK universities. However, as I reviewed the related research, which primarily focuses on the challenges international students face, I became increasingly interested in exploring the specific difficulties they encounter and the potential factors that contribute to these challenges during their cross-cultural transition into a different learning environment. Meanwhile, drawing on learning theories, Dewey's view of experience as beginning with resistance highlights the importance of exploring the challenges Chinese international students face during their transition. Moreover, Mezirow's view of learning as a process of making meaning and interpreting experience informed my decision to delve deeper into how these students interpreted their experiences and made sense of the factors that influenced them.

Furthermore, both Dewey and Mezirow emphasise learning as a reflective process on the past and present experiences, which can lead to different decisions within complex social, cultural, and interpersonal contexts. This led me to question whether the varied cross-cultural transition experiences and interpretations could lead to different reflective actions of international students, which might distinctly influence their development in the UK universities.

Building on my interest and the objective of gaining a comprehensive understanding of international students' learning experiences, this research initially aimed to answer the question: *What are Chinese PGT international students' cross-cultural transition experiences at a UK university?* To explore this further, three sub-questions were developed:

1. What challenges do Chinese PGT students experience as they transition into studying in UK HEIs, and what might be the potential factors contributing to these challenges?
2. How do Chinese PGT students interpret their learning experiences and the factors that shape them in UK HEIs?
3. How do Chinese PGT students' actions and decisions influence their development during their cross-cultural transition within UK HEIs?

### **3.2 Research paradigms**

Since this research examined individuals' responses to environmental changes, an ontological position of constructionism was adopted. Constructionism holds that social phenomena are created, continuously shaped, and revised through social interactions, experiences, and contextual changes (Bryman 2012). This provided the basis for understanding that reality was socially constructed through students' interactions with the new cultural and academic environment in this research.

An interpretivist epistemological position was deemed suitable for this research, as it asserts that knowledge is created through humans' interpretations of their experiences, rather than existing independently (Constantino 2008; Pascale 2011). Interpretivism prioritises explaining human behaviour over generalising or predicting causes and effects (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). This approach allowed me to interpret the

participants' experiences and understand the nuanced differences among them (Saunders et al. 2009). It also encouraged reflective practices on the research methods and the impact of researcher-participant relationships (Chen 2008). Thus, the role of the researcher was crucial for this research. Based on this epistemological position, I focused on exploring the meaning of participants' experiences during their cross-cultural transition, while also being aware that my interpretation of their experiences was influenced by my own context and background.

Furthermore, this research adopted an inductive approach, drawing conclusions from specific data without relying on pre-assumed theories or generalisations. The aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Chinese international students in the UK, avoiding stereotypes or preconceived notions. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to identify patterns in the data, with a focus on recognising themes before formulating explanations. An inductive approach was chosen to better understand the participants' experiences in the study.

### **3.3 Researcher's positionality**

#### ***3.3.1 Researcher's positionality as an insider***

The participants in this research were Chinese international students in the UK. As a former Chinese international student myself, I shared a cultural background and context with the participants, fostering a deep empathetic understanding. Interpretivism was chosen as the epistemological position because it emphasises empathetic understanding of human action (Bryman 2008) and encourages researchers to explore issues deeply in their natural environment. It holds that researchers should adopt an insider perspective on their research objectives, viewing social reality as embedded in its context rather than abstracted from it (Nickerson 2023). An interpretivist approach acknowledges that the researcher's views can influence research questions, framework design, material

selection, and result interpretation (Bredo and Feinberg 1982).

Given the shared nationality, ethnicity, and similar academic and cultural backgrounds with the participants, I recognised that my personal life experiences, values, and ideas would inevitably influence the analysis of research data. Viewing myself as an integral part of the research process, I perceived this research as a collaborative endeavour with the participants, positioning myself as an insider rather than an outsider researcher in our collective effort to address the research questions and derive findings.

In addition, an interpretivist approach enabled me to interpret participants' experiences through the lens of my own background, beyond my prior experience as a Chinese international student in the UK. Having worked in UK HEIs for over eight years at the time of conducting this research, my role involved supporting and teaching students across various areas. This gave me a thorough understanding of students' experiences, as well as the policies and guidelines within UK HEIs. As a result, when analysing the collected data, I not only applied an empathetic understanding of the participants; but also drew upon the extensive professional insights and accumulated skills.

### ***3.3.2 Researcher's positionality as a transient insider***

As the research progressed, particularly during the data analysis stage, I began to realise that I held a privileged position as both a 'educator in UK HEI' and a 'local immigrant citizen'. On one hand, my identity as an international student was established long ago, and I have spent more than eight years working at the university in roles that encompass both student services and teaching. This experience placed me in a privileged position, as I had a much more solid understanding of university policies and academic expectations than the participants. Moreover, having spent nearly half my life living in the UK (twice long enough to be considered a British citizen), I was no longer identified as an 'international' student. I had become so immersed in British culture that my

original cultural and personal identity had been significantly influenced by local ones.

During the later stages of the interviews, as participants became more familiar with my background, some began to seek my advice on their studies, asking for suggestions on how to improve their academic performance or seeking solutions to their confusion. This placed me in a beneficial position as a researcher, as the participants trusted me and were more willing to share in-depth and personal experiences. It also led me to view my role not merely as an insider, but as a “transient insider,” who shared the cultural and linguistic skills with the participants for a deep connection but also allowing for a more flexible relationship that can change depending on the context (Roberts 2018, p.116).

My flexible positionality emerged during both the interview and data analysis stages. During the interviews, my role shifted based on the topics discussed: I was an ‘insider’ when listening to their stories as an international student, but an ‘outsider’ when they sought help and explanations. This duality also manifested in the data analysis stage, where I positioned myself as an ‘outsider’ to explain the factors behind their experiences and as an ‘insider’ to empathically understand them.

Hence, the chosen research paradigm was aligned with the overarching aim of thoroughly exploring and understanding the subjective dimensions of participants’ experiences, grounded in my own perspectives and attitudes. This research was rooted in an interpretative perspective, and its design naturally included a reflective aspect for me as the researcher.

### **3.4 Multilayer theoretical frameworks and their application to the research**

#### ***3.4.1 Social constructivism in education***

Social constructivist theories were adopted as the first layer of the theoretical

framework to provide the epistemological foundation for analysing the collected data. These theories align with the research's ontological and epistemological positions, as they focus on the collaborative nature of learning. Under this theoretical framework, knowledge is not singular but is constructed through an individual's interpretation of experiences, shaped by cultural and social factors.

This theoretical framework provided a foundational definition of the research focus, which was the learning behaviour of Chinese international students in a different environment, both internally and externally. Internally, it defined knowledge as being constructed through the interpretation of experiences, offering a basis for addressing the research question of how participants interpret their experiences. Externally, the framework emphasised the importance of interacting with the sociocultural context, which was crucial for understanding participants' experiences under significant environmental change.

Especially, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development was used to analyse the elements influencing the cross-cultural transition experiences of the participants, particularly the role of cultural tools and dialogue with MKOs in constructing knowledge. The theory helped identify specific influences, such as language and interpersonal relationships, which shaped the participants' learning experiences in different cultural environments. These elements were critical in understanding participants' challenges and identifying factors contributing to these challenges in a different sociocultural context. This theory complemented Mezirow's and Dewey's frameworks by emphasising the importance of external factors in discourse for knowledge construction.

#### ***3.4.2 Dewey's explanation of experience***

Dewey's theory of experience and educative experience served as the second layer of

the theoretical framework, providing a valuable philosophical perspective for conceptualising participants' experiences. Dewey's concept of the unity of experience, from impulse to completion, was beneficial to interpret the entire process of the experiences. Additionally, his theory offered a lens for understanding how different aspects of an experience interconnect, enabling a deeper exploration of participants' experiences.

Moreover, Dewey's emphasis on personal growth through continuity and interaction in educative experiences offered both a longitudinal and lateral perspective for analysing experiences in different environments. The concept of continuity helped to explain how participants' prior experiences in China influenced their learning in the UK, while the concept of interaction clarified how they engaged with the new environment. This layer of the framework complemented social constructivism's view of knowledge construction through critical reflection on past experiences and social interaction, while also providing a lens for understanding how different decisions and actions shaped participants' personal growth during cross-cultural transitions. It shifted the focus from mere academic adjustment to the development of experience over time, helping to address a research gap in how international students' transitions are explored.

### ***3.4.3 Mezirow's transformative learning theory***

Mezirow's TLT served as the third layer of the theoretical framework, providing an empirical and detailed framework for explaining adult learning processes in this research. It was used to understand, interpret and analyse how participants critically reflected on past experiences and underwent transformations in their frames of reference through various phases of learning new knowledge.

As discussed, the cross-cultural transition of international students has transformative potential, leading to changes in their meaning structures. In this research, Mezirow's

TLT provided a more practical and empirical framework than Dewey's more philosophical approach, conceptualising participants' learning in different cultural settings as a process of transformation. For example, Mezirow's concepts of meaning structures could help to interpret how participants transformed their existing frames of reference during the cross-cultural transition to build a more comprehensive understanding in distinct academic settings.

Moreover, Mezirow's TLT enabled an examination of participants' learning experiences over a 12-month period, based on its detailed ten phases of transformation, making it particularly suited for this longitudinal study. It also provided a clear understanding of the personal cognitive process, while sociocultural theory focused on how environmental factors influenced the participants' transformative learning. Its view of learning as self-transformation highlighted the role of internal factors such as prior experiences, the complexity of their academic discipline and personal responses to challenge in shaping their cross-cultural transitions.

### **3.5 Chapter summary**

This chapter outlined the formulation of the research questions, including specific questions designed to explore Chinese international students' learning experiences within UK universities. It also described the research paradigm, with constructionism as the ontological stance and interpretivism as the epistemological position and discussed the researcher's flexible positionality in this research as a 'transient insider'. The chapter also introduced the multilayer theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, explaining their rationale and application in shaping the research questions and guiding the data analysis.

The next chapter will introduce the specific research methods, including sampling, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

## Chapter 4 Research methods

### 4.1 Research design

#### *4.1.1 A longitudinal study*

##### *i. Reasons for using a longitudinal design*

A longitudinal design was adopted for this research, involving repeated data collection from the same participants over 12 months (Shadish et al. 2002). It was used to explore how participants' experiences evolved as they gradually immersed themselves in the local academic context. Meanwhile, it also enabled me to identify participants' learning patterns and gain a deeper understanding of how different decisions and actions influenced their cross-cultural transitions over time (Bryman 2012).

##### *ii. Selection of timeline*

This longitudinal study took place over an academic year, with data collection occurring in February and March, as well as in July and August in 2022. The timing was strategically chosen based on the following reasons.

First, due to COVID-19 restrictions in 2021 and 2022, international students were permitted to arrive later in the academic year, but no later than the end of the first term. Conducting interviews and surveys in February and March aligned with this policy while allowing participants to reflect on their experiences after completing the first term. By this stage, they had engaged in various academic activities, such as receiving feedback from educators, participating in group work, and completing assessments. By July, as they began their dissertations and conducted research projects in their disciplines, data collection captured their overall academic experiences while allowing for six additional months of reflection, particularly on undertaking a research project in

HEI.

Secondly, choosing these two data collection periods aimed to capture participants' experiences at different stages of their transition. Research suggests that for many international students, culture shock decreases after the first term (Wang et al. 2012). Collecting data in February and March, after participants had sufficient time to experience cultural shock, allowed for an exploration of how they reflected on their experiences beyond the immediate impact of transitioning to a new environment. Meanwhile, collecting data after nine months of immersion in their studies provided insights into how their learning behaviours evolved and how they navigated challenges over time.

#### ***4.2.2 Mixed methods research***

This research adopted mixed methods to collect and analyse both quantitative and qualitative data, offering a comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Creswell 2014). By combining the strengths of both approaches (Greene et al. 1989), this design enabled an exploration of participants' diverse experiences and the identification of emerging patterns in their cross-cultural transitions

##### *i. The research methods*

First, a qualitative design was chosen for this research to answer the research questions by collecting in-depth data through interviews and other methods (Merriam 1998). This approach enabled me to go beyond superficial comparisons. The qualitative paradigm also allowed me to inductively explore socially constructed meanings without limiting them to predefined categories. As the researcher, with an empathetic understanding of the participants, this approach enabled me to examine their words and actions to present their experiences.

On the other hand, the collection of quantitative data allowed for sophisticated

statistical analyses to compare different data collection periods and participant categories (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). It was used to summarise the data set and explore the relationship between some independent variables and the challenges faced by participants during their studies in the UK. This enabled me to gather numerical data and generalise findings to explain the learning experiences of the participants (Babbie 2010; Muijs 2010).

*ii. Reasons for adopting mixed methods*

Patton (1990) suggests that qualitative data can enrich quantitative results by providing in-depth case elaboration. In this research, I first collected quantitative data, followed by qualitative data to add depth and thoroughly interpret participants' experiences. The quantitative phase assessed participants' overall challenging experiences, enabling comparisons across data collection periods to identify trends. Qualitative data were collected to explore participants' learning experiences in greater depth, identifying key themes. By using mixed methods, I was able to gain a more comprehensive view of the research and examine phenomena from various perspectives (Shorten and Smith 2017).

A mixed methods design was chosen for this study as it was best suited to address the research questions, which could not be fully answered by quantitative or qualitative methods alone (Ivankova et al. 2006; Tashakkori and Creswell 2007). Quantitative data, drawn from a larger number of participants, helped identify common challenges faced in UK higher education and how these evolved over time, as outlined in the first sub-question. Qualitative data provided opportunities for participants to have a strong voice and share their experiences (Shorten and Smith 2017), offering insights into their interpretations and how their decisions and actions influenced their development, thereby addressing the remaining two sub-questions. Therefore, through mixed methods of data collection, different avenues of exploration of the research questions were conducted to enrich the evidence and enable the questions to be answered more

deeply (Wisdom and Creswell 2013).

## **4.2 Sampling strategy**

### ***4.2.1 Purposeful sampling***

I used purposeful sampling in this study to select cases with rich information for detailed investigation (Patton 2002; Ishak and Bakar 2014). This approach helped me discover, understand, and gain insight from the samples chosen for this research.

The sample included Chinese international students who were studying on a 12-month full-time PGT course in the School of Social Sciences, School of Architecture and School of Journalism at one university in the UK. Participants from different academic levels or cultural-linguistic backgrounds were excluded from the sample. This deliberate choice of sample aimed to ensure a focused examination and understanding of the sample group's experiences.

The reason to choose students studying in the above three Schools was because of the balanced proportion of Chinese international students and the nature of the courses provided by the Schools. In terms of Chinese international student enrolment in postgraduate courses, the percentage of Chinese students was around 30% in each School, while the remaining students hailed from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, these three Schools employed different pedagogies and forms of assessment tailored to their respective modules and disciplines. Consequently, participants from these schools encountered a variety of learning activities within UK higher education settings, offering a comprehensive spectrum of experiences.

In addition, all participants for this research originated from mainland China, and had finished at least two years of undergraduate studies in mainland China. Other regions, including Hongkong, Taiwan and Singapore, were not included due to differences in

culture between regions and countries, which could have the potential to unduly confound the consistency of experience (Lee 2016).

#### ***4.2.2 Ethics and review***

##### *i. Ethical approval*

Ethics were considered for all aspects of this research. According to the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (2018) and the Cardiff University ethical code of practice (Cardiff University 2023), an application for ethical review was made before carrying out the participants recruitment and data collection stage. For this application, all documents related to the research, including interview questions' outline, questionnaire draft, consent forms, recruitment advertisements, invitation letters, and participants' information sheets, were submitted to gain ethical approval in January 2022 (see Appendix 1). During the first round of data collection, due to the lifting of COVID-19 rules and restrictions by the end of January 2022, I was able to visit classrooms to recruit participants and extend the sample range, so an amended application was submitted for ethical review and was approved in February.

##### *ii. Consent procedures*

Every effort was exerted to minimise the stress and psychological pressure experienced by the research participants, taking into careful consideration the impact of COVID-19 rules and restrictions. Before engaging participants, a clear and detailed explanation of the research objectives, procedures, and potential impacts was provided, allowing individuals to make informed decisions about their involvement. Flexibility in scheduling and accommodating individual preferences played a crucial role in alleviating undue stress. For instance, participants had the option to choose whether to conduct surveys or interviews either in person or online. This ensured that participation remained voluntary and convenient for all involved, contributing to a more positive and

adaptable research experience.

In securing informed consent for interviews and surveys, participants chose between email or a written consent form. Those opting for online participation received an email detailing the research objective, procedures, and the voluntary nature of involvement. Alternatively, participants preferring written consent were provided with an on-site physical consent form, ensuring clarity on study details. Participants had ample time to review, ask questions, and provide written consent by signing the document.

*iii. Data protection*

All research was conducted as approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, covering areas of confidentiality, intellectual property, and data security. To safeguard the confidentiality of participants' personal information throughout the research process, their identities were anonymised, and their responses remained confidential. This encompassed the use of anonymised questionnaires and the assignment of code names for interviewees. Also, the research data were stored in a secure and accessible form and were retained in compliance with the Cardiff University's data management, confidentiality, and data protection policy.

**4.2.3 Recruitment of participants**

*i. Expand the scope of the sample during the COVID-19 pandemic*

This research was initially devised in late 2020 during the second wave of COVID-19 and widespread lockdowns in the UK. In the subsequent months, the entire UK entered a third lockdown as the wave peaked in mid-January 2021. At that point, I was concerned that most university programs would only endorse online classes for the 2021-2022 academic year, limiting students' ability to fully experience the academic environment in the UK.

Given this context, the initial research plan was to exclusively recruit participants from the School of Journalism. Because, compared to other Schools, it was one of the few continuing offline teachings during the pandemic. When I commenced recruiting research participants and collecting data in January 2022, I concentrated exclusively on recruiting participants from the School of Journalism. However, later in the same month, the government began lifting restrictions and proposed coexisting with COVID-19. Consequently, UK universities reopened campuses and resumed hybrid teaching. In response, I adjusted the original data collection plan, gradually incorporating two additional Schools, the School of Social Sciences, and the School of Architecture, into the sample recruitment.

ii. *Research participant's recruitment*

a) *Online and onsite recruitment*

After receiving ethical approval from Cardiff University, I recruited participants using different approaches. For online channels, I posted the recruitment poster in both English and Chinese (see Appendix 2) in the Teams and Yammer group of the University. Recruitment emails, provided in both English and Chinese (refer to the Appendix 3), were disseminated to all PGT students in the School of Social Sciences, School of Journalism, and School of Architecture. This outreach was conducted with the explicit permission and support of the respective Schools' teaching offices.

Apart from using the above-mentioned online channels, I also printed out recruitment posters and displayed them on the information board in the library, student centres and classrooms in the above three Schools. I visited each School, where I introduced the research to PGT students before or after their lectures, as well as during lecture breaks. These interactions were conducted with the gracious permission of the lecturers involved.

*b) Interview participants' recruitment*

When conducting a mixed methods investigation involving both quantitative and qualitative research, the findings from the survey could be used as the basis for the selection of the purposive sample (Bryman 2012). I carefully selected 14 participants from the survey who expressed interest in the interview, ensuring diversity in representation. The criteria included a balance of students from different schools, both male and female, as well as a mix of mature and younger students. Additionally, the sample included students with prior study experience in the UK and those with varying levels of English language proficiency. These participants also shared noteworthy thoughts and ideas in response to open-ended questions, making them particularly valuable subjects for further investigation.

*iii. Participants for interviews and questionnaires*

*a) Participants for questionnaires*

There were 81 participants who met the criteria and completed the questionnaire in Time 1 (January/February 2022), spreading evenly among the three Schools (29:27:25). Female participants counted for 81.84% (66:81), while male participants were only 18.52% (15:81). As of November 30, 2021, this university's PGT courses saw 64.4% female and 35.1% male enrolment. In the 2021 Census for England and Wales, non-EU-born international students were 55.0% female and 45.0% male (Office for National Statistics 2023). Research indicates that Chinese female students studying in popular Western destinations consistently outnumber their male counterparts (Tu and Xie 2020). Given that all participants were enrolled in art and humanities-based courses, the observed gender distribution among the participants can be reasonably expected.

However, after six months, only 45 out of the 81 original participants completed the questionnaire at Time 2 (July/August 2022), most of them were from the School of

Journalism (53.3%) and the School of Social Science (35.6%). Only five participants from the School of Architecture (11.1%) filled in the questionnaire at Time 2. One possible explanation for fewer architecture students participating in the second-round survey was that they were required to complete a design and field trip-based thesis in the second semester, leaving them with limited time and motivation compared to participants from other Schools. A majority of the participants were female, with exactly 84.44% (38:45). Similar to Time 1, over 66% of the participants (30:45) had met the lowest IELTS score requirement. Three out of 45 participants had studied in the UK before starting their postgraduate courses, whereas the rest participants had not studied in the UK before.

*b) Participants for interviews*

Among the 14 interviewees, detailed information is presented in Table 4.1. Four were male and ten were female. Three had an IELTS score below 6.5 and had completed pre-sessional English courses, while two had prior undergraduate study experiences in the UK. Twelve obtained their bachelor's degrees in mainland China. Of the two with UK study experience, one completed a dual-degree program between China and the UK, spending two years in China and two years in the UK, while the other pursued a higher national diploma in China before a 12-month Top-Up degree in England.

To maintain anonymity, participants were labelled A to N based on their schools: seven were in the School of Journalism, four in the School of Social Sciences, and three in the School of Architecture. Their postgraduate programs spanned disciplines such as media, communication, education, environment, and design.

Only one participant, Participant G, was interviewed solely at Time 1 due to academic failure, while the rest participated in both Time 1 and Time 2 interviews. Another, Participant N, had to retake a core module. Their experiences are further explored in

later sections with a focused investigation.

*Table 4.1 Participants for interviews*

Interview Participants Information Table						
Participant	Gender	School	PGT program	IELTS	Studied in the UK	Interviewed time
<b>A</b>	Male	Journalism	Journalism	7	No	January & July 2022
<b>B</b>	Female	Journalism	Journalism	7	No	January & July 2022
<b>C</b>	Female	Journalism	Documentary	6.5	No	January & July 2022
<b>D</b>	Female	Journalism	Media	6.5	No	February & July 2022
<b>E</b>	Male	Journalism	Documentary	6.5	No	February & August 2022
<b>F</b>	Female	Journalism	Public Relationship	N/A	Yes	February & July 2022
<b>G*</b>	Female	Journalism	Communication	7	No	January 2022*
<b>H</b>	Female	Social Science	Education	6	No	February & July 2022
<b>I</b>	Female	Social Science	Education	N/A	Yes	February & July 2022
<b>J</b>	Female	Social Science	Education	6	No	February & July 2022
<b>K</b>	Male	Social Science	Education	7	No	February & July 2022
<b>L</b>	Male	Architecture	Environment	6	No	February & July 2022
<b>M</b>	Female	Architecture	Architecture	5.5	No	February & July 2022
<b>N*</b>	Female	Architecture	Architecture	6.5	No	February & August 2022

\*= *A further focused investigation included in Chapter 6*

### 4.3 Research data collection

#### 4.3.1 Quantitative data collection: questionnaires with Likert-scale

To gather quantitative data, participants were requested to fill out identical questionnaires (refer to Appendix 4) at both Time 1 and Time 2. The questionnaire included three types of questions: closed questions, Likert-type questions and open questions. The questionnaire was designed to be bilingual, with both English and Chinese presented on the same line, allowing participants to choose the language with which they were more comfortable. Before distribution, it was kindly reviewed by two Chinese PGT students who provided valuable feedback on some question details, helping to improve clarity and ensure the wording made sense.

##### i. *Structure of the questionnaire*

The questionnaire comprised two categories: **Demographics** (Question 1 to 7) and **Experiences** (Question 8 to 36). Data related to gender, age, academic major, former study experiences and level of language fluency (IELTS scores or equivalent) were collected via the first seven closed questions in **Demographics**. The remaining questions, relating to students' experiences, were included in **Experiences**. In this part, participants could respond to questions on a six-point Likert scale regarding their experience with six sections of academic activities: **lectures, group work, presentations, tutorials, reading** and **writing**. For the first four sections of academic activities, experiences of online/offline were asked with two separate sets of Likert-scale questions, in order to distinguish between the two modes of learning.

##### ii. *Design of the questions*

All seven questions in the category of **Demographics** are closed-ended and designed to gather background information about the participants. Specifically, questions about participants' language proficiency, prior study experiences, and academic major were

included to explore whether these factors might influence their learning experiences.

These aspects were selected based on the published literature and theoretical framework. First, language was considered a key factor because it plays a crucial role in dialogue and, consequently, in the learning process. While research shows that international students may meet the English language entry requirements, many still face challenges with academic communication (Yen and Kuzma 2009). In addition, prior study experiences and academic major were included because, according to Dewey's educational theory and TLT, previous learning experiences influence the learning objectives students are expected to engage with in the present.

In the category of *Experiences*, each academic activity section began with a closed question asking participants if they had experienced that specific type of academic activity, with online and offline experiences queried separately. This design aimed to accommodate participant preferences, enhancing accessibility and flexibility for a diverse range of individuals.

Following positive responses to the closed questions, a series of six-point Likert-scale questions were used to measure the intensity of respondents' feeling about challenging experiences (Bryman 2012). This included their perceptions of difficulties expressed through specific statements describing their experiences, such as finding it difficult to understand material in English. These statements were developed based on published literature identifying common challenges faced by international students in Western universities. Additionally, the statements were grouped into categories of academic events to facilitate clear analysis of difficulties in distinct areas of academic activities. A six-point Likert scale was employed to prevent respondents from gravitating towards the middle category, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", as shown in Figure 4.1 below.

Section 5 Reading and Academic Referencing 文献阅读与引用

*Closed question*

\* 32. Have you got experiences in reading and quoting English materials for your study in Cardiff University 在卡迪夫大学的学习中，您是否阅读并引用过英语文献：

Yes 有过

No 没有

*A series of six-point Likert-scale questions*

\* 33. Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences 针对阅读和引用英语学术材料，请选择最符合您个人感受的选项：

	非常不同意	不同意	略微不同意	部分同意	同意	非常同意
I find it difficult to understand the academic materials in English, so I need to spend a lot of time reading academic journals and papers. 我觉得很难理解英语学术文献，所以我需要花很多时间阅读英语学术期刊和论文。	<input type="radio"/>					
I find it difficult to find required academic journals and materials in English for my study in Cardiff University. 对我而言，很难找到自己需要的英语学术期刊和研究文献。	<input type="radio"/>					
I find it difficult to quote and reference academic materials in English during my study in Cardiff University. 我觉得在论文/作业中，用英语正确引用学术内容有难度。	<input type="radio"/>					

Figure 4.1 Example of one section of academic activities in the questionnaire

On the other hand, the final item, Question 37, was open-ended, giving participants the opportunity to share any additional experiences or challenges they encountered during their studies in the UK. This was intended to ensure that participants did not feel their personal views or experiences had to “fit the straitjacket of prescribed answers” (Gillham 2000, p. 34).

**4.3.2 Qualitative data collection: in-depth semi-structured interviews**

For the collection of qualitative data, in-depth semi-constructed interviews were designed to offer a deeper explanation and interpretation of the quantitative findings. Interviews were conducted with a smaller size of participants who had finished the questionnaires and expressed their interest to further participate in the interviews of the

research. Two semi-structured interviews were carried out at Time 1 and Time 2. Major interview questions were also piloted with two Chinese PGT students, whose feedback helped refine the wording and improve the overall clarity of the questions before the full interviews were conducted.

The initial interviews were designed with open-ended questions to explore participants' broader experiences and how they interpreted them, addressing the second sub-question. They began with inquiries about participants' backgrounds, the courses they were studying, and their overall impressions. This was followed by more focused questions on academic activities, examining whether factors identified in the literature, such as language proficiency or academic discipline, influenced their experiences. Beyond challenges, the interviews also explored wider aspects of learning, including preferences for learning individually or in groups, as well as reflections on assessment marks and feedback (see Appendix 5). Overall, the interviews aimed to uncover the nature of the challenges faced (providing details to the first sub-question) and to collect participants' interpretations of their learning experiences (addressing the second sub-question).

The second round of interviews served as follow-ups, revisiting the aforementioned topics. Notably, participants were not tasked with reiterating their initial responses; rather, they were encouraged to share any new insights, feelings, or changes that had transpired since the previous interviews. Building on the first-round interviews, the second round focused on exploring the development of participants' experiences over the 12-month study period, in order to address the third sub-question.

In-depth interviewing was used as a fruitful and powerful method to better understand student life on campuses (Kuh and Andreas 1991; Fontana and Frey 2000), and to illuminate features of culture and human experience (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). Also, through conducting interviews, the researcher and the participants engaged

themselves in a conversation focused on the questions related to a research study (Merriam 1998; De Marrais 2004). At the same time, the researcher and participants were engaged in co-constructing meaning within a particular type of social relationship (Mishler 1986). This helped me, as a researcher, to become more closely linked to the participants to gain significant details and opportunities for empathetic understanding.

Furthermore, due to participants' varied learning backgrounds and course content, I needed to demonstrate flexibility and sensitivity towards individual and diverse topics. Hence, semi-structured interviews were chosen over fully structured or open-ended formats, as they combine predetermined questions with flexibility, allowing the interviewer to explore emerging topics and delve deeper based on the interviewee's responses. They also enable the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and adjust the conversation so as to collect richer data from the participants (Galletta 2013).

Similar to the questionnaire, participants invited for the interviews could choose between online and in-person interviews for both rounds. In the initial interviews, all participants opted for in-person sessions. However, during the second round, half of the participants chose remote interviews due to various commitments, such as field research outside the UK or coursework. The transition between online and offline interviews did not introduce significant variations in the quality or depth of the data collected, underscoring the consistency in participant responses across both modes.

It is worth noting that all interviews were conducted in the participants' native language (Chinese), allowing them to fully express themselves (Welch and Piekkari 2006). This decision was informed by earlier discussions from existing literature, which highlighted the language barrier as one of the challenges faced by Chinese students studying in the UK. Conducting interviews in English might have added stress to the participants. Moreover, being a native Chinese speaker myself, conducting interviews in Chinese also facilitated the establishment of trust between the participants and the researcher

(Lincoln and Guba 1985).

#### 4.4 Questionnaire data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participants' responses to closed- and open-ended questionnaire items, including Likert-type scales. Bivariate analyses (including t-tests and ANOVA) were conducted to examine associations between participants' background characteristics (e.g., IELTS scores, prior learning experience, and the academic School in which they were enrolled) and their reported experiences or attitudes.

##### 4.4.1 *Descriptive Analysis*

In this research, descriptive analysis was adopted for the first phase of quantitative data analysis to represent the basic information about variables in the data set. Different measurements of descriptive analysis were adopted according to the nature of the questions, so as to better present the data points in a constructive way such that patterns of the data could emerge (Rawat 2021).

##### *i. Closed questions*

The first stage of survey data analysis involved conducting descriptive analysis for all the closed questions in the *Demographic* category. For categorical variables (e.g., gender, major, English language test scores, etc.), percentages were computed to describe the background of all participants who completed the questionnaires in Time 1 and Time 2 separately. Also, the percentage of whether they had experienced each learning and teaching activity was calculated at Time 1 and Time 2 respectively to present the types of academic activities participants experienced.

### *ii. Likert-type questions*

The second stage of survey data analysis involved computing the descriptive statistics for the Likert-type questions from the questionnaires collected at Time 1 and Time 2. For the six-point Likert scale used in the questionnaire, each item of the agreement level was given a score from 1 to 6: 1 for strongly disagree; 2 for disagree; 3 for slightly disagree; 4 for partly agree; 5 for agree and 6 for strongly agree. I calculated the average score for each question, followed by the computation of the mean, maximum, and minimum scores, along with the percentage distribution of choices for each Likert-type question series.

In this part of the data analysis, I conducted individual analyses of Likert-type questions to gain a deeper understanding of specific aspects related to the challenges and preferences experienced by the participants studying in the UK. This approach aimed to identify which categories of academic activities and learning tasks were most challenging, as well as which learning approaches posed greater difficulties for them.

### *iii. Open question*

Since the questionnaire included one open-ended question to capture participants' experiences that were not addressed in the predefined options, the third phase of survey data analysis therefore focused on categorising the responses to the open-ended questions.

Utilising the thematic analysis method with this dataset, I systematically examined all the collected data following Braun et al.'s (2016) thematic analysis model. I commenced by acquainting myself with the entirety of the data, proceeded to generate initial codes, and then sought patterns, similarities, and discrepancies in the coded data to identify themes. Then, I reviewed these themes before defining and naming them with clear definitions and descriptions, and finally integrating this analysis into written

form. This analytical approach served as a complementary dimension to the outcomes derived from the closed and Likert-type questions, providing additional depth and context to the overall findings.

*iv. Comparison of descriptive analysis*

For the comparison of descriptive analysis between Time 1 and Time 2, participants who did not complete the survey at Time 2 were excluded, ensuring a matched sample. Responses from Time 1 and Time 2 were then compared to identify and analyse any changes over time. Meanwhile, paired sample t-tests were conducted to assess the statistical significance of the observed changes. This additional analysis aimed to discern any longitudinal trends or variations within the same sample groups, providing a more nuanced understanding of the data and enabling a comparative assessment between the two data collection periods.

**4.4.2 Bivariate Analysis**

After completing the descriptive analysis, I proceeded to conduct a bivariate analysis of the Likert-type questions to unveil potential relationships among two variables, for example, the impact of English language proficiency on participants' experiences in conducting English academic writing in a UK university.

The responses to the closed demographic questions were used as one set of variables, while the mean scores of each series of Likert-scale questions served as another set of variables for comparison. I chose to focus exclusively on the statistics from the 81 participants collected at Time 1. Since the Time 1 data was gathered when participants had been engaged in the course for less than five months. This time frame was considered significant because it better captures participants' initial challenges and struggles in the course, providing insights into potential relationships between their learning experiences and influencing factors. The following three variables comprised

the set of potential factors selected for in-depth investigation:

1. **Variable A:** IELTS score before enrolling the course (whether they have achieved 6.5 or above, i.e., the lowest requirement for PGT courses in the University)
2. **Variable B:** Former studying experiences in the UK (whether they had studied in the UK before)
3. **Variable C:** Academic schools that the participants were studying in (Journalism, Social Sciences or Architecture)

For this stage of bivariate analysis, each of the aforementioned variables and the mean of the Likert-type questions were treated as dependent variables, as shown in Figure 4.2. Additionally, independent sample t-tests for Variable A and Variable B, and an ANOVA test for Variable C were conducted to examine potential relationships. The bivariate analysis aimed to explore potential connections between participants' challenging experiences in the UK and relevant objective factors, including their English language ability, prior study experiences, and enrolled school, in order to address the first sub-question of the research.



*Figure 4.2 The process of bivariate analysis of quantitative data*

The objective of this phase in the quantitative data analysis was twofold: to enhance

visualisation of variable distributions and to explore potential relationships between key factors. Specifically, the analysis examined whether participants with higher English language proficiency or prior UK study experience faced fewer challenges, and whether the academic majors they pursued were related to the difficulties they encountered during their studies in the UK. This quantitative analysis served an exploratory purpose, providing an initial overview of patterns and relationships, which was then deepened and interpreted through the subsequent qualitative data to offer richer explanations of the findings.

#### **4.5 Interview data analysis**

The qualitative data collected in the interviews, including transcripts, coding, and the entire data analysis process, was preserved in its original Chinese language. As a native Chinese speaker, I diligently transcribed all semi-structured interview audiotapes into Chinese text. Conducting data analysis and coding in Chinese not only enhanced comprehension but also ensured an accurate representation of participants' experiences. The constant comparative analysis method, a systematic and iterative data analysis method in qualitative research (Glaser and Strauss 1967), was employed for analysing all interview data, serving the purpose of thematic analysis.

##### ***4.5.1 Coding the interview data***

In this research, coding the qualitative data refers to the systematic process of analysing data by identifying key passages, uncovering and defining concepts, and establishing connections between them (Gibbs 2007). This coding process served as a foundational step in the constant comparative analysis, which was employed as part of the thematic analysis. Coding in this research unfolded across three levels of analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

First, open coding serves as a common initial step in the analysis of qualitative research

data. In this preliminary phase of the coding process, I compared data and consistently poses questions to understand both what was and what was not comprehended (Kolb 2012). For this research, values coding was adopted for the first stage of open coding, which is a method that delves into the subjective nature of the human experience. This approach also involves labelling values, attitudes, and belief systems (Saldana 2009). This method was particularly suitable for capturing lived experiences, as it draws attention to emotionally charged and personally meaningful statements. In practice, I focused on segments of the data where participants articulated their feelings, priorities, or internal reasoning, such as “I feel...”, “I need...”, “I think...”, “I experience...”, “I conduct...” and “It is important for me...”, which were treated as indicators of sentiment. In this way, emotional tone was manually interpreted through these statements. This helped inform emerging themes related to participants’ affective responses. By the conclusion of this phase, preliminary codes were generated to capture their feelings and experiences as expressed in the raw data.

The next phase was to perform axial coding, which involved refining the categories that emerged from open coding (Ridolfo and Schoua-Glusberg 2011). During this phase, I initially structured the codes into six sections according to the academic activities they were related to, including *Lecture*, *Group work/discussion*, *Presentation*, *Tutorial*, *Reading* and *Writing*, then merged and clarified categories found from open coding.

The last phase of coding, the selective coding, aimed to identify and select the core category and systematically connect it to other categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Axial coding and selective coding were mainly used during the constant comparison of all the codes, which are explained in more detail in the next section.

#### ***4.5.2 The constant comparative analysis method***

##### *i. Definition and origins*

The constant comparative method is a method to analyse data, originally suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as part of their grounded theory approach. However, it is also a frequently applied approach to analysing and exploring qualitative data, which relies on constantly comparing and contrasting (Leong et al. 2010; Harding 2015; Turner 2022). Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that the purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to develop theory more systematically by using explicit coding and analytic procedures. In other words, this method aims to generate a theory that is integrated, close to the data, and expressed in a form clear enough for further testing (Conrad et al. 1993). This method is used by researchers to develop concepts from data through coding and analysing at the same time (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Taylor and Bogdan 1998; Ridolfo and Schoua-Glusberg 2011), proposed a way to bridge the differences between a basic comprehensive thematic coding approach, and theory generation with analysis (Turner 2022).

##### *ii. Using constant comparative method outside of grounded theory*

Since the constant comparative method was originally developed as part of the grounded theory approach, it appears to be considered synonymous with grounded theory, but the data analysis method of constant comparison does not in itself establish a grounded theory design (O'Connor et al. 2008; Fram 2013). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the constant comparative analysis method is an iterative and inductive process of reducing the data through constant recoding. Through constant comparison, all research data are systematically compared with every other data point in the entire dataset. Therefore, the constant comparative technique is not necessarily restricted to just grounded theory. Elements and concepts can be applied in thematic analysis,

discourse analysis, and even approaches like interpretative phenomenological analysis in the later stages (Turner 2022).

A small number of publications have discussed the use of constant comparative analysis method outside grounded theory. For instance, Fram's (2008) research employs constant comparative analysis to facilitate a naturalistic inquiry and qualitative analysis, not grounded theory. Fram does not aim to conduct grounded theory but rather utilises constant comparative analysis to identify and confirm the existence of a socialisation process, rather than to formulate an emerging substantive theory (Fram 2013). Leong and his fellow researchers (2010) combine both constant comparative and discourse analyses to virtual world research, using this method as an inductive data-driven analysis to find recurring patterns and determine initial salient themes of samples' reactions. They point out that the discourse analysis provides a more fine-tuned approach to understanding a specific issue, whereas the constant comparative method is more useful for exploratory research (Leong et al. 2010). Harding (2015) also indicates that the constant comparative method is a helpful approach to identifying similarities and differences between cases in a dataset, which could support a thematic analysis, aiming to examine commonality, examining differences and examining relationships (Gibson and Brown 2009).

All the above examples indicate that, while the constant comparison method originated in grounded theory, it is not exclusively confined to this theoretical framework. Therefore, in the context of this study, the constant comparison method was employed beyond the confines of grounded theory. It was utilised to analyse qualitative interview data, aligning with the thematic analysis approach. This application aimed to enhance the identification and exploration of both commonalities and distinctions in the learning experiences of Chinese PGT students in the UK.

*iii. Adoption rationale for the constant comparative method*

*a) The ongoing recruitment of participants during the data analysis period*

I opted for the constant comparative method in this research for several reasons, one of which was its capability to leverage ongoing sampling and continuous participant recruitment. This approach allows for the incorporation of new participants, providing additional points of comparison, which facilitates a more in-depth exploration of specific themes (Turner 2022). When Glaser and Strauss (1967) propose this method hybrid model for analysts to use, they also state that analysts should be essentially re-examining the code each time something is added to it and identifying commonalities and differences more systematically and thoroughly.

As mentioned, I initially planned to recruit participants solely from the School of Journalism due to their commitment to in-person teaching during the pandemic. However, after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, I obtained ethical approval to expand the sample pool to include participants from two additional schools. In this scenario, while recruiting participants from the other two schools, I simultaneously began analysing the initial set of interview transcripts from the School of Journalism. New data was continuously added during this analysis process until no further participants were included. In essence, during the initiation data analysis process for the first set, sample recruitment was still underway. Therefore, employing the constant comparative method proved advantageous for uncovering patterns in this dynamic, ongoing sampling process within the research dataset.

*b) A powerful approach to identifying similarities and differences in thematic analysis*

Another reason why I preferred using the constant comparative method for qualitative data analysis was because it could effectively identify connections and differences in the reactions of individuals within a specific cultural group. This method is essential

for refining categories and themes, identifying commonalities, and uncovering patterns (Tesch 1990). It also enables the exploration of how different cultural groups respond to the same experiences, offering insights into their unique challenges and responses (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Creswell 1998). Therefore, it was the most suitable approach for analysing participants' learning experiences within a particular cultural context during their cross-cultural transition.

*c) Minimising researcher bias with a more rigorous qualitative analytic approach*

The last but not least, the constant comparative method is also regarded as a rigorous and systematic analysis technique to understand the phenomenon and describe the research findings. This analysis method enables the researchers to stay close to the participants' feelings, thoughts and actions (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). It could help to minimise the potential bias and assumptions from the researcher, especially when the interviewees and the researcher were from the same cultural background with similar experiences.

Therefore, I aimed to reduce confirmation bias by engaging in constant comparison throughout the research. This involved thoroughly analysing data and participant responses to ensure my own predispositions did not influence the interpretation process. This method helped me remain deeply connected to the data and the perspectives of participants, rather than relying solely on my own assumptions and experiences (Turner 2022).

***4.5.3 Analysing interview data using the constant comparative method***

I applied Boeije's (2002) five-step constant comparative analysis procedure when analysing the interview data. Necessary adjustments were made to accommodate the specific requirements of this research since the number of steps is flexible and can be dependent on the material involved (Boeije 2002). Consequently, I chose to adhere to

the first three steps of the procedure and introduced a new step involving the comparison of data collected at two different data collection periods in this longitudinal study. These steps were better suited for the goals of this research as outlined in more detail below:

1. Comparison within a single interview
2. Comparison between interviews within the same group
3. Comparison of interviews from different groups
4. Comparison of interviews conducted in Time 1 and Time 2

*i. Step 1: Comparison within a single interview*

During the initial data analysis, comparisons were made within individual interviews. By comparing different parts, I aimed to develop categories, structure the information and label them with the most appropriate code. When conducting comparisons within a single interview, my focus was to categorise the codes related to participants' interpretations and explanations of their experiences with different academic activities and learning tasks, identifying which aspects were perceived as challenging and why. The codes were also organised around their preferences and experiences with various learning approaches and the factors influencing them. This approach aimed to provide deeper, experience-based explanations that complemented and enriched the quantitative findings.

Through this process, I achieved a structured summary of each interview with provisional codes by referencing the four research questions as the major frames. Table 4.2 provided one example of the codes I created after the first step of comparison within one single interview. The original codes were divided into four major categories with different colours: *experiences with each academic activity* were in red; *experiences of online or offline learning and teaching* were in blue; *experiences of group work or individual work* were in green; and the *challenging experiences* were in black.

Table 4.2 The codes from the first step of comparison of one single interview

Categories	Codes
<i>Experiences with Each Academic Activity</i>	<p><b>Lecture</b> Challenges with lecture comprehension</p> <p><b>Tutorial</b> Stress to interact with educators Get detailed support</p> <p><b>Group Work</b> Teaming with Chinese peers Communication barriers with foreign peers Struggle with group work involving foreign peers</p> <p><b>Presentation</b> Uncooperative peers in group</p> <p><b>Reading</b> Difficulty understanding theoretical/classic readings</p> <p><b>Writing</b> Struggle to express clearly in writing Unclear assessment criteria</p>
<i>Experiences of Online or Offline Learning and Teaching</i>	<p>Prefer face-to-face learning</p> <p>Better focus and engagement</p>
<i>Experiences of Group Work or Individual Work</i>	<p>Prefer independent work</p> <p>Avoid uncooperative peers</p>
<i>Challenging Experiences</i>	<p>Unfamiliar teaching style with no fixed answers</p> <p>Unclear grading standards</p> <p>Late exposure to critical thinking</p> <p>Language and ideological differences</p>

In addition, because this research adopted a theoretical framework that emphasises learning as a reflective process, I picked out lines and codes from each single interview

in which participants interpreted their experiences concerning their prior learning in different cultural contexts. I also categorised these comparisons of experiences based on the type of academic activity, providing additional insights for analysing their learning experiences.

ii. *Step 2: Comparison between interviews within the same group*

Since interview participants were from three distinct Schools in the same UK university, therefore, they were categorised into three groups based on their School affiliation. This categorisation ensured that participants within the same group (School) were engaged in similar disciplines of subjects with similar academic requirements. After analysing and comparing codes within each interview, this set of codes was further compared to codes from every other interview within the same group, marking the second step of the constant comparison process. For example, Figure 4.3 illustrated a flowchart depicting the second step of the comparison process for the sample group (Participants H, I, J, K) in the School of Social Sciences. This visual representation demonstrated the six rounds of comparison conducted to ensure that each participant within the group was thoroughly compared with every other participant.

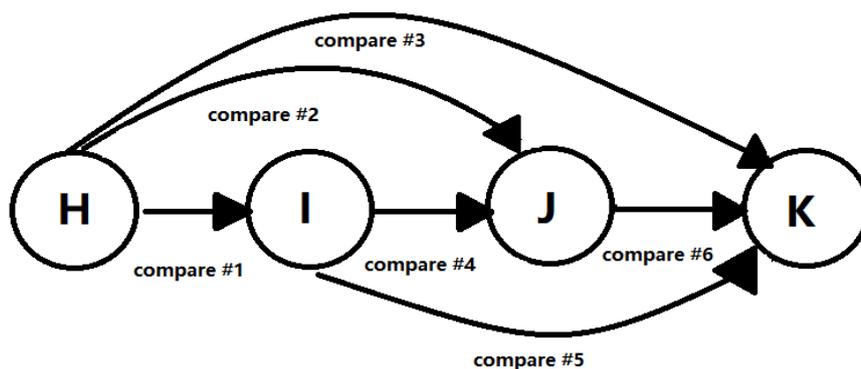


Figure 4.3 The flow chart of the second step comparison conducted for the sample group in the School of Social Sciences

Through this process, I enhanced the content within each category by conducting a thorough analysis. Once all interviews within the same group were compared, I employed selective coding to unveil patterns by identifying combinations of codes. This method was instrumental in pinpointing conditions that accounted for differences between codes. Initially, I consolidated similar codes under the last overarching three categories (*online or offline; group or independent study; challenging experiences*), then grouped analogous codes related to *experiences with each academic activity* section. Additionally, distinct codes with specific conditions or experiences were distinctly marked.

*iii. Step 3: Comparison of interviews from different groups*

In this third step, interviews from two/three different groups were compared concerning their experience of the same academic activities in different Schools of the same UK university. Also, I continued to compare their experiences of online or offline learning, group or independent study and their challenges during their studies in the UK. This step aimed to complete the picture already obtained (Boeije 2002) and to enrich the information of each category to represent the overall patterns.

During this process, I compared codes and themes from one particular group to the other two groups separately, making sure that every group had been compared with each other, and then overlooked all three groups to capture the commonalities and differences, so as to establish core themes. Similar to the second step, comparable codes under the same guidance question and the same section of activities were combined, and dissimilar codes were noted down. I applied selective coding again at this step to systematically connect the core categories to other categories, validate those similarities and relationships, and complete the big picture.

I first compared data from the School of Journalism and the School of Architecture, as

both relied heavily on group work, projects, and presentations. Next, I compared the School of Journalism with the School of Social Sciences, focusing on academic reading and writing, given their shared emphasis on humanities. Finally, I compared data from the School of Social Sciences and the School of Architecture, which, despite differing disciplines, revealed shared learning experiences across academic activities. By the end, I overlooked all three groups and triangulated the data sets to complete the whole picture of all the data collected, so as to find the existing patterns (as shown in below Figure 4.4).

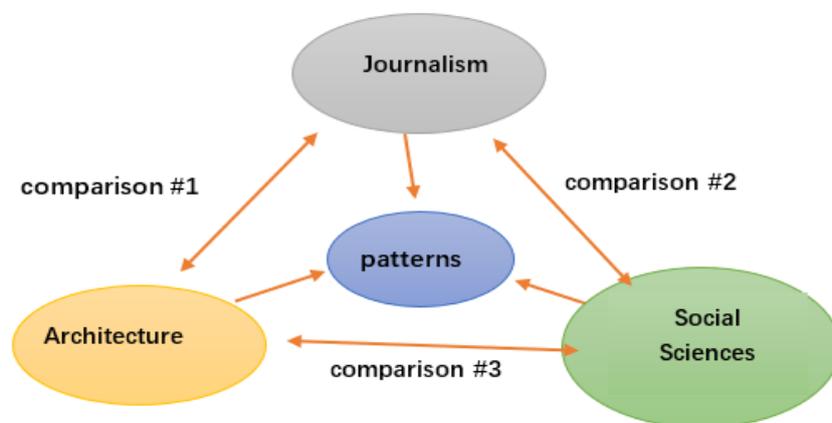


Figure 4.4 Triangulating data from three Schools

iv. *Step 4: Comparison of interviews conducted in Time 1 and Time 2*

The last step of comparison was carried out both at the group level and the individual level to identify changes and consistencies in the patterns observed throughout the research period. I then compared the codes from each individual participant between Time 1 and Time 2 to trace their development and transformation during the cultural transition. Additionally, I examined the themes within each group at both periods to identify similarities and differences. Finally, analogous codes across all three groups between the two periods were compared to detect changes in patterns.

Through the final step of comparison, I could identify the potential external factors

influencing participants' experiences as they gradually immersed themselves in the British academic context. Considering these external factors while analysing participants' experiences allowed me to better understand how various elements contribute to their learning experiences and ultimately affect their overall cross-cultural transition.

#### **4.6 Limitations**

The key concern of the research design of a longitudinal study was the attrition of the sample at Time 2, which might result in an invalid conclusion. Attrition reduced the size of the sample and could lead to non-response bias, which could affect the validity of the study findings (Sedgwick 2014).

Meanwhile, I was also aware of the pitfalls in using Likert-scale questionnaires and in-depth interviews as the research instruments. One of the notable limitations of Likert-style surveying, however, was the potential for irrelevant questioning, omitted perspectives, and assumptions of generalisability (Miller 1991). A single Likert question condensed various individuals' opinions or attitudes into a singular statement or question with a range of response options. Therefore, the interpretation of its results was based on the collective responses of all participants who answered that question. It was in this aggregation process that the potential for reliability and validity issues arose.

On the other hand, using interviews could bring social desirability bias among the interviewees, with a tendency to answer the questions with answers that were more socially acceptable to others. Therefore, the result could be too subjective and impressionistic (Bryman 2012).

Another potential limitation of the data collection came from purposive sampling. Since all participants were PGT students from three specific Schools within the same university, the sample may not be representative of the broader population of Chinese

PGT students in the UK, for example, those studying at other UK universities, enrolled in different disciplines, or undertaking varied programme structures. Therefore, the generalisability of the findings gained from quantitative data might be limited.

#### **4.7 Reliability, trustworthiness, and reflexivity**

##### ***4.7.1 Reliability and validity of the quantitative research design***

In terms of validity, the closed questions and Likert-scale statements were developed based on factors and experiences identified in previous studies on international students in the UK. To minimise comprehension and linguistic bias, clear instructions were provided in both Mandarin Chinese and English to ensure participants understood how to respond to the questions. The questionnaire was also piloted and reviewed by Chinese PGT students to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness. Additionally, participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, helping to reduce concerns about social desirability bias. These steps were designed to promote the overall validity of the instrument by reducing potential bias and encouraging honest and thoughtful responses.

Regarding the design of the Likert-scale items, a six-point format without a neutral midpoint was used to encourage participants to consider each item carefully. While this approach may limit neutral responses, it is commonly used to reduce indecisive answers and encourage more definitive feedback (Creswell 2009). However, it is acknowledged that the absence of a midpoint can have some effects on response patterns, which was considered when interpreting the results.

To support reliability over time, identical questionnaires were administered at two data collection points in this longitudinal study, with item wording kept consistent across both waves to minimise variability due to measurement changes.

#### ***4.7.2 Trustworthiness of the qualitative research design***

Primarily, a purposeful sampling strategy was used, selecting participants who had learning experience in both HEIs in China and the UK, strengthening the credibility of the study by ensuring that the data reflected relevant and rich cross-cultural experiences. Efforts were also made to include participants from a range of academic disciplines, supporting transferability by capturing diverse academic perspectives.

In addition, the interview questions were piloted and reviewed to ensure clarity and relevance, improving the consistency of data collection, therefore, to enhance the dependability of the research. All interviews were recorded and transcribed accurately, ensuring data integrity for analysis. The shared cultural background between the researcher and participants facilitated culturally sensitive communication and interpretation of nuanced responses (Gill and Maclean 2011). Trustworthiness was further strengthened through researcher reflexivity, with efforts to set aside biases (Merriam 1998).

On the other hand, trustworthiness in the open-ended survey questions was achieved through clear instructions and question design, allowing participants to share experiences not covered by closed questions. Anonymity encouraged honesty and reduced biases, particularly regarding personal experiences.

Lastly, guided by a multilayered theoretical framework, the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches enabled both theoretical and methodological triangulation, thereby strengthening the overall coherence and credibility of the findings.

#### ***4.7.3 Researcher's reflexivity***

Reflexivity, in this research, referred to my awareness of my own influence, biases, and perspectives as the researcher throughout the research process. Taking my position as a

transient insider, I acknowledged and addressed my subjectivity throughout the research process by critically reflecting on how my background, experiences, values, and assumptions might inevitably influence various stages of the research.

First, as I had similar experiences with the participants, it could be easy for me to connect their experiences to my own assumptions based on what I've been through before. This might affect how I understand the data, making it more about my explanation than what the participants actually thought and experienced. So, it was important to recognise the transient insider status, especially when analysing the data, because my perspectives may inadvertently guide the interpretation of themes and patterns.

In addition, I was also aware of the evolving nature of my connection with the participants, who had recently arrived in the host cultural context, while I had lived here for a considerable time. It was important to recognise the potential gap in interpreting and understanding their responses, especially when applying sociocultural theory to analyse their experiences. This factor was crucial to consider when exploring the impact of different sociocultural contexts on the participants' experiences during cross-cultural transition.

Also, I acknowledged the researcher bias in this research, therefore, I selected a more meticulous qualitative analysis approach. This approach empowered me to stay deeply entwined with the data itself and the expressions of the participants, ensuring that my interpretations were grounded in their perspectives rather than being influenced by my personal assumptions. Throughout this process, I consistently paid high attention to reducing the impact of my preconceptions on coding decisions and the identification of key themes. Additionally, while interpreting the results, being mindful of my own positionality was also considered important.

Therefore, throughout the entire research process, I consistently reminded myself to remain aware of all the above aspects.

#### **4.8 Chapter summary**

In conclusion, the longitudinal design employed in this research provided a strong framework for capturing the dynamics of participants' experiences over time. The mixed-methods approach balanced quantitative precision with qualitative depth, enabling a comprehensive exploration that facilitated a multifaceted understanding of the participants' experiences. This approach enriched the analysis with more detailed and vivid data. Data analysis focused on identifying themes in participants' experiences while minimising researcher bias, ultimately enhancing the quality of the analysis within an interpretive research framework.

The following Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 will explore the research findings and present key themes related to the participants' experiences. Additionally, it will present how varied decisions and actions of the interview participant influenced their development during cross-cultural transitions in the UK.

## **Chapter 5 Cross-cultural encounters: learning experiences of Chinese international students in a UK university**

The findings are divided into two chapters to provide a structured analysis of participants' learning experiences and development. Chapter 5 identifies key themes that reflect the common challenges participants faced in adapting to a different learning environment, capturing shared patterns across the group. It also explores the factors influencing these experiences and incorporates participants' interpretations to further explain them, thereby addressing the first two sub-questions of the research. Building on these themes, Chapter 6 adopts a longitudinal perspective, examining how individual participants' learning experiences evolved over time. It explores how their actions and decisions shaped their development, presenting how they built on previous experiences to shape new experiences during their cross-cultural transition to address the third sub-question.

In Chapter 5, participants' learning experiences were categorised into four major themes: *Application of English language, learning through reasoning and evidence, learning engagement* and *interpersonal dynamics*, with sub-themes to illustrate the overall participants' experiences (as shown in Table 5.1). Both quantitative and qualitative data are presented with charts, graphs and quotes throughout the chapters to provide a concise overview of the key findings. These findings highlight the experiences of participants navigating their education in a different cultural

environment, focusing on the challenges they encounter.

Table 5.1 Themes of participants' learning experiences

<b>Application of English language</b>	<i>Verbal interaction</i>	Ineffective communication
		Weaker class presentation
	<i>Academic writing</i>	Struggles with academic writing
		Challenges in precise expression
<b>Learning through reasoning and research</b>	<i>Reasoning in reading and writing</i>	Ongoing challenges in understanding literature and referencing
		Applying academic thinking and theories in academic writing
	<i>Conducting research</i>	Struggles with designing and conducting research
		Citing and referencing literature for research
<b>Learning engagement</b>	<i>Self-motivated</i>	Understanding assessment expectations; Limited guidance and non-directive feedback
	<i>Independent</i>	Preference for studying in a group; Less independence and creativity
	<i>Interactive</i>	Preference for interactive, communicative and engaged learning
<b>Interpersonal dynamics</b>	<i>Weakness in class</i>	Fear of asking questions Avoiding making mistakes Appointing a spokesperson in the group
	<i>Group success</i>	Achieving unified outcome Compromising for group interest
	<i>Relationship with educators</i>	Equitable communication Impartial marking

### 5.1 Experiences with application of English language

Based on the findings, the primary theme of participants' learning experiences was adapting to a different language for academic activities. Most participants faced challenges using English for learning, including verbal interactions and academic writing. This theme reflects the impact of a changed language environment on the learning process.

### ***5.1.1 Experience with using English in verbal interaction***

This section presents participants' experiences with verbal interactions in English, focusing challenges in communication and making presentation.

#### *i. Ineffective communication*

Eight of the 14 interview participants admitted during Time 1 that communication difficulties arising from language barriers hindered effective collaboration between them and other students. Nine participants, in the open-question section of the questionnaire, expressed difficulty in achieving native-level proficiency in discussions, while others struggled to follow native speakers' expressions or keep up with their speaking speed. Participant B even cried during her first group discussion with her British classmates:

In the beginning, when I first arrived here (to study), I felt that despite my performance in the IELTS exam, the actual application of English was still very challenging and different. I couldn't understand their (British classmates) conversations very well, so when we were discussing and forming groups for assignments, I even cried because I was the only Chinese person in the whole group.

*(Participant B)*

Other participants confessed that due to their limited English language ability, they would prefer to form a group with fellow Chinese classmates, and it was quite common for Chinese international students to do so:

Because they (British classmates) speak quickly and have faster thinking (than Chinese international students), we struggle to keep up with them. It's actually easier to have discussions with Chinese students in this regard.

*(Participant J)*

Six of the 14 interview participants implied that their non-Chinese classmates faced difficulties in maintaining smooth communication during discussions with them, which

made it even more difficult to obtain valuable input and suggestions from each other. Participant C described her group work with non-Chinese classmates as a combination of “gestures and body language”:

When it comes to communicating with foreign students, there might be instances where you struggle to express yourself clearly, and they may also have difficulty understanding you. During the whole process, we were using gestures and body language to convey our messages.

*(Participant C)*

In addition, this language barrier arose not only from language proficiency but also from differences in cultural and historical backgrounds reflected in vocabulary. For example, certain historical and political terms were unfamiliar to Chinese international students, as these topics were not commonly discussed in China:

When discussing with British students, there are many new words I did not know because of different ideologies (in China), such as NATO. I find it challenging to articulate my viewpoints effectively because I lack understanding of these topics.

*(Participant D)*

It’s challenging to discuss complex cultural topics with locals, as I find it difficult to express myself and unsure if my expressions are accurate, such as Welsh history or the Normandy landings...In China, I didn’t delve into the deeper aspects of European history.

*(Participant E)*

Participant F particularly noted that the ineffective communication was due to the “different expression of the same thing in different languages.” She mentioned the concept of a “golden sentence” (金句) existed only in Chinese, often associated with memorable or wise sayings. She found it difficult to find an equivalent phrase in English that carried the same connotations or impact.

After nine months of immersed study in an English-speaking environment, approximately one-third of the interview participants had grown more confident in

communicating with non-Chinese classmates. Participant D addressed that she found communicating with group members in English more smoothly in the second term. Participant B, who cried during her first group discussion, was excited to share that she had finally found her voice during the group work:

I have noticed a significant change. After one semester, we (British classmates and I) could work on group assignments without any difficulties or obstacles...I overcame the language barrier. This semester I feel that communication is becoming smoother, and I am also voicing my own opinions (during group discussions).

*(Participant B)*

On the other hand, the four participants studying in the School of Social Sciences brought up that Chinese and non-Chinese students started to form separate groups for assignments and discussions during Time 2. This led to a sense of mutual exclusion. Participant I felt that other students were reluctant to engage with Chinese classmates and preferred smoother interactions with their own peers. Participant H even expressed dissatisfaction that the lecturers were more engaged in group discussions with her British classmates because they could have “faster-paced conversations and a higher level of fluency in English.”

*ii. Weaker class presentation*

Another common experience of using English to express ideas verbally occurred during class presentations. More than half of the participants perceived their non-Chinese peers as being more skilled in making presentations, and the gap between Chinese and non-Chinese students was evident.

Four out of 14 interview participants considered the noticeable difference was due to their lower language proficiency, since English was their second language. Participant F mentioned that there were unexpected situations during the presentation when she could not find the appropriate English vocabulary:

During one presentation, I needed to talk about a military dog trainer, but I didn't know how to say it. I then told the professor it was a little dog taken out every day...the overall performance was really bad.

*(Participant F)*

Participant B recognised that she required more time than her British peers when using English to do a presentation:

I think the main issue lies in language proficiency. First, it takes me some time to switch (English) to an understandable language (mother language) and comprehend what is being said. Then, I need additional time to formulate my thoughts and express them in the target language.

*(Participant B)*

Besides, participants also observed that their non-Chinese peers were more confident and engaged when making presentations in class due to their language advantage. Participant A highlighted the considerable disparity in language proficiency often resulted in added stress for Chinese students when presenting English content in public. Participant K noticed that Chinese students had obvious signs of being nervous when making presentations:

Sometimes, there might be a lack of confidence in delivering presentations due to limited language proficiency (for Chinese students). The fear of not knowing if one's expressions are correct can result in various nervous behaviours or excessive repetition. These actions reveal their nervousness and concern about not speaking well (in English).

*(Participant K)*

Participants further added that their non-Chinese classmates delivered more compelling presentations with greater audience interaction. They observed that non-Chinese peers often presented without scripts, expressing their ideas freely and engaging more actively with the audience. In contrast, Chinese international students tended to “read word-for-word from the script” and “narrate the content of the presentation.”

### 5.1.2 Experience with using English in academic writing

This section delves into participants' experiences with academic writing in English, highlighting the difficulties they faced in expressing ideas clearly and accurately.

#### i. Struggles with academic writing

One major challenge participants faced throughout their learning was academic writing in English. As shown in Figure 5.1, the mean score of 4.0 indicated that participants found academic writing to be one of the most difficult learning activities during their first three months in the UK. This figure compared the perceived difficulty of various academic tasks, highlighting academic writing as a significant initial challenge relative to other activities.

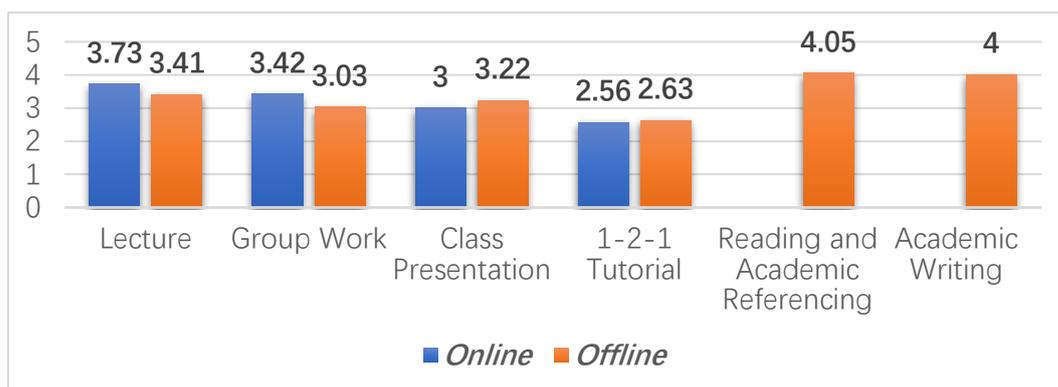


Figure 5.1 Means of learning experiences of Chinese international students – the first three months

A closer look at the statements with scores above 4.0 in Figure 5.2 showed that most challenges were related to academic writing and reading, including writing academic essays in English (4.25).

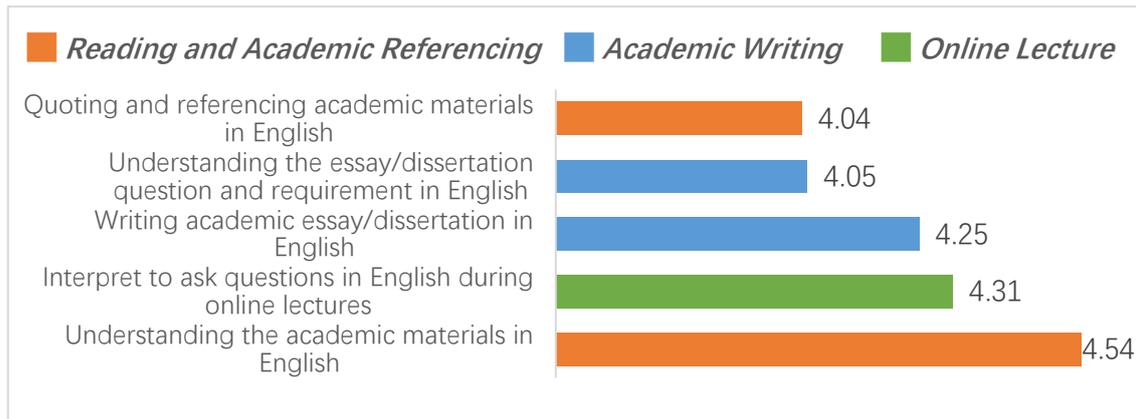


Figure 5.2 Statements with a mean score over 4.0 – the first three months

As shown in below Figure 5.3, participants with lower IELTS scores reported greater difficulty in using English as the medium of instruction across various learning activities. In particular, they reported more difficulty with academic writing ( $M = 4.28$ ), with a group mean difference of 0.53. Smaller differences were observed for reading and referencing (0.09), online lectures (0.19), and online tutorials ( $-0.05$ ), none of which were substantial. Before conducting inferential analysis, assumptions for the independent samples t-test, including normality and homogeneity of variances, were assessed and met. However, the t-test did not reveal a statistically significant difference between the lower and higher IELTS groups,  $t(18) = 1.02, p = 0.32$ .

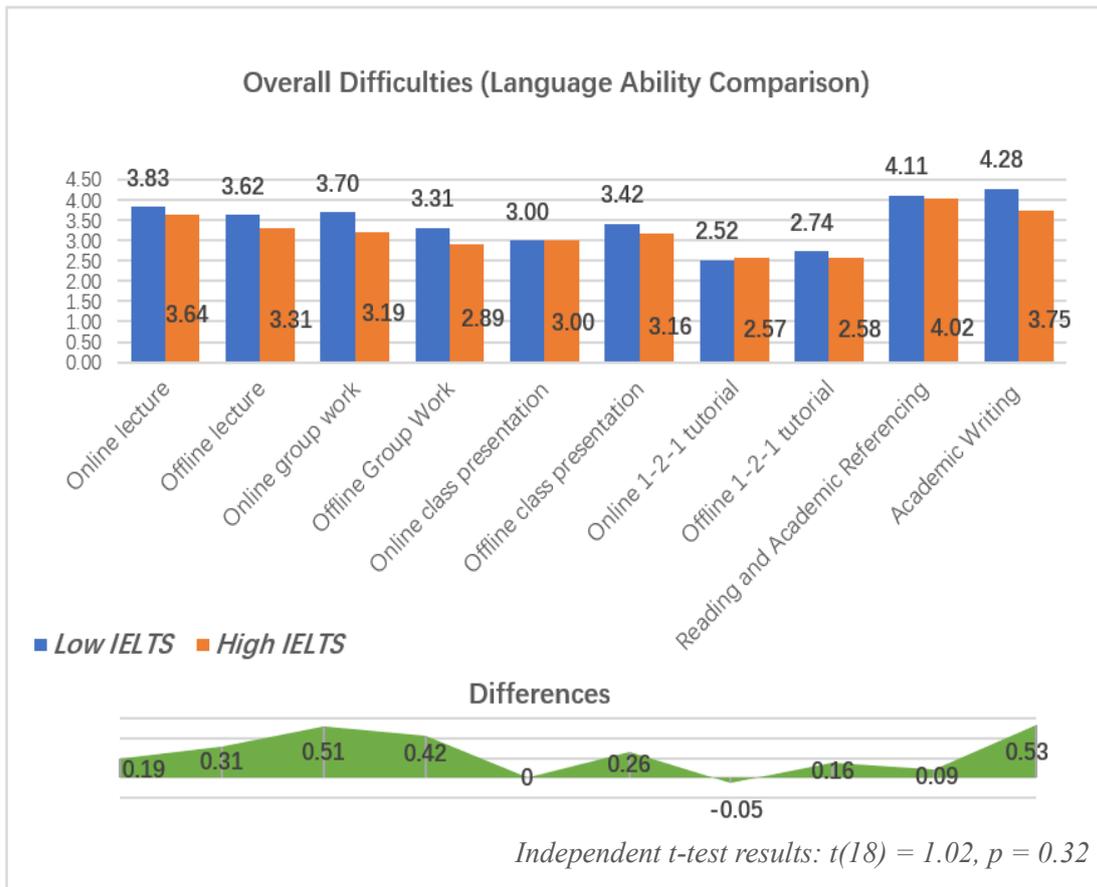


Figure 5.3 Time 1 overall difficulties: Low IELTS vs. High IELTS

According to the statistics gathered after nine months of study, the score for academic writing dropped to 2.8. Despite it continued to be one of the top two most challenging academic activities, the nature of the difficulty shifted from expression to thinking, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.2.1.

ii. *Challenges in precise expression*

Half of the interview participants addressed that they struggled to reveal their opinions clearly and precisely in English writing. For example, it was hard to “use the right sentence structure to explain thoughts in English” or participants failed to “have enough vocabulary to express themselves.” Also, four of the participants argued that even though they had clearly demonstrated their points of view, their markers and tutors still

could not understand their English writing. Participant D mentioned that she felt it was hard to refine her written piece, because “it was even more complicated to demonstrate views precisely in English than simply making them clear”. As a result, the feedback she received from her marker also stated that she did not express her views clearly enough in the essays.

Participant F received similar feedback on her English writing, and implied that she felt frustrated:

I really thought that I had surely made my opinions clearly known in my essay, but my marker still considered that my writing was not clear ... I was not satisfied with my marks, my marker felt my writing was not clear enough, but I have already tried my best.

*(Participant F)*

She further explained that it was the difference between Chinese and English language that made English writing so hard for her:

In Chinese writing, it's essential to use impactful phrases and be concise; and to describe reality in beautiful languages...they (British markers) do not care about the beautiful writing.

*(Participant F)*

Participant J offered a similar explanation, highlighting the differences between the two languages:

When writing, Chinese tends to be more verbose...English expressions tend to be more concise.

*(Participant J)*

Participant B attributed the difficulty in language use to cultural differences, suggesting that writing a report in English would be easier if she were a local.

## **5.2 Experiences with learning through reasoning and research**

Another theme of participants' experiences was learning through reasoning and research. This theme represents the intellectual aspects of academic reasoning; and the practical aspects of conducting research for learning. It was a key part of their cross-cultural learning experiences, reflecting the struggles they faced when adapting to a different academic environment.

### ***5.2.1 Experience of reasoning in academic practice***

This section explores how participants engage in academic reasoning, focusing on the challenges they encountered in both reading and writing in English, and how they applied academic thinking within these contexts.

#### *i. Reasoning in academic reading*

##### *a) Challenges in reading and academic referencing*

Based on the collected data, findings indicated that participants did not fully understand the underlying reasoning within the academic context, which involves drawing conclusions, analysing information, and justifying actions based on logic. This posed significant challenges for them during their studies, particularly when reading English academic publications.

According to the data collected at both time points, participants reported reading and academic referencing as the most challenging academic activities. A paired samples t-test, conducted after meeting assumptions, indicated that mean scores for all activities significantly decreased at Time 2 compared to Time 1,  $t(9) = 19.59, p < .001$ . However, reading and academic referencing remained the only activities with mean scores above 3.0, showing the least improvement (see Figure 5.4).

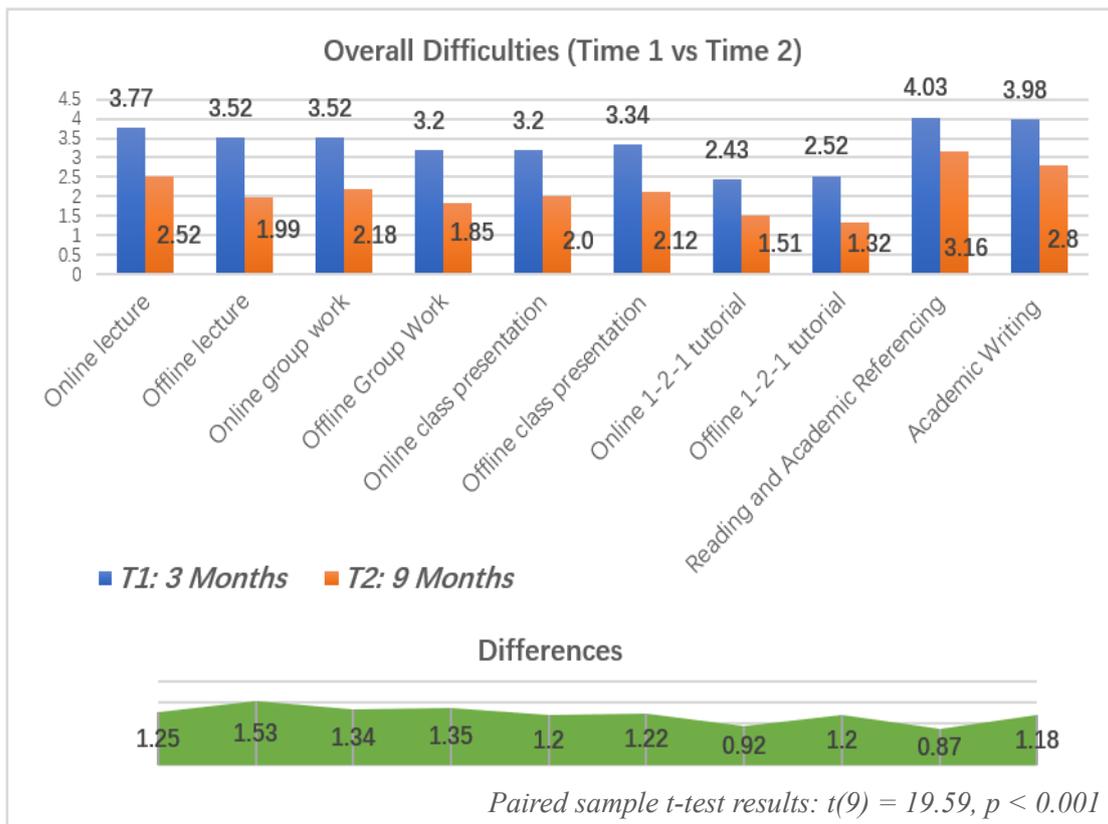


Figure 5.4 Means of academic experiences of Chinese international students in the UK HEI – Time 1 vs. Time 2

Understanding academic materials in English was considered the most challenging task throughout participants' entire academic year in the UK. A one-way ANOVA, conducted after checking assumptions, indicated a significant effect of school on participants' perceived difficulty during their first three months,  $F(2, 15) = 6.24, p =$

0.0107. Participants in the School of Social Sciences reported the greatest challenge, with a mean score of 5.15, compared to 4.20 and 4.24 in the other two schools.

In addition, difficulties in reading also affected reading speed and motivation to engage with the texts. Participants noted that they spent too much time reading English materials. Two separate anonymous replies to the open question in the survey indicated that they were scared of facing difficulties in reading English literature, stating that they were “resisting reading more English materials due to a fear of difficulties.” Participant K shared a similar feeling by using the phrase “throwing the game” when reading English academic texts:

I have been throwing the game... It was too difficult for me to read them in English, and it cost too much time.

*(Participant K)*

*b) Struggles in understanding English literature*

Interview participants shared that another struggle they faced was understanding English materials. A majority admitted using translation software to convert English articles into Chinese before reading. They explained that the difficulty stemmed not from knowing individual word meanings but from comprehending the overall content, despite having access to translated journals.

These experiences were even more prevalent among participants from the School of Social Sciences, most interview participants from this School perceived that the biggest challenge was understanding English academic articles. All admitted that even though the articles were translated into Chinese, they were not able to understand them. Participant K stated that reading English academic journals was more arduous than other documents:

Reading academic essays and reports was so different compared to reading English newspapers, it was much harder to understand the

academic stuff.

*(Participant K)*

Other participants attributed this experience to the differing interpretations of the social sciences subjects between China and the UK. Participant H described her feelings of reading the examples and cases adopted in social science journals as a process of persuading herself to think that all the cases were related:

My roommates and I are studying the same postgraduate program (in Education discipline), and none of us could ever understand any case used in the articles we read for the course. For example, I do not understand why a medical case is related to social science. We never use these cases in China. My roommates and I have concluded that if one English journal article had one Chinese author, yes, just one Chinese author, it would be much easier to understand than an article written by all foreign authors.

*(Participant H)*

Participant H further explained that she was not able to identify whether an author's opinion was recognised as left-wing or right-wing, while that was not a problem for the local students in her class:

I feel that when it comes to ordinary articles, I might not be able to discern them. Local students may read something and immediately identify whether it was written from a left-wing or right-wing perspective, but I simply can't do that. I don't understand this at all.

*(Participant H)*

c) *Limited progress and ongoing challenges*

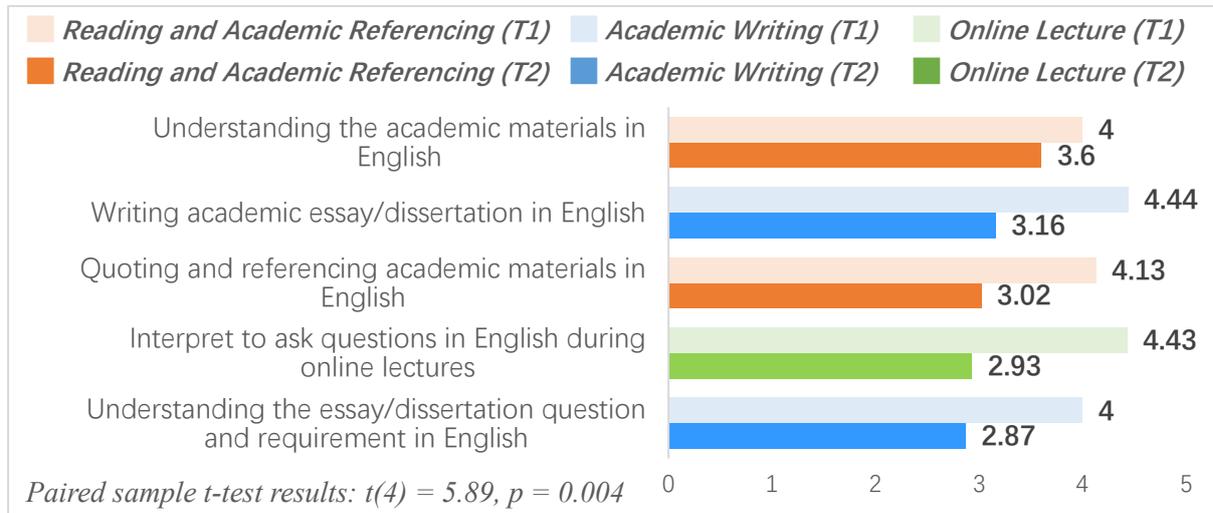


Figure 5.5 Statements with the highest mean score in Time 2 compared to Time 1

Although above Figure 5.5 showed a clear decrease in participants' difficulty in understanding English materials over time, a paired samples t-test (assumptions met) confirmed that this reduction was statistically significant,  $t(4) = 5.89, p = 0.004$ . However, this activity still had the highest mean score (3.60) after nine months of immersion in a UK university. In comparison, other academic activities had mean scores below 3.50, indicating that participants struggled less with their studies at Time 2, while progress in understanding English materials remained modest.

Furthermore, most interview participants expressed that they had very limited improvements in reading English materials. For example, Participant N expressed her frustration at having made no improvement after nine months of immersive study, stating that she was "forcing herself to read." Similarly, Participant J was disappointed by her minimal progress in reading English articles, noting that she only found it easier to understand them when they included a conclusion or statistics.

Three interview participants even mentioned that they found reading English material

more challenging after six months. Participant M described her experiences in reading academic literature in English as “irritating”:

Compared to last term, I felt this term’s reading list was more irritating. For last term, we were only required to read short journals, while this term we were asked to read thick textbooks.

*(Participant M)*

*ii. Reasoning in academic writing*

As mentioned in Chapter 5.2.1, Chinese international students faced challenges in writing essays in English during both data collection periods. After nine months of study in the UK, their main difficulties when writing final dissertations shifted from language expression to “how to think” and “what to include.” This change demonstrated their struggle to apply academic thinking skills, which were also an important element of academic reasoning. These skills primarily involved logical and critical thinking, as well as theory analysis.

*a) Applying academic thinking*

Over half of the interview participants mentioned that they had never been taught how to think in English writing. Some qualitative data further revealed that a few participants credited their struggle in academic writing in English to the different ways of logical thinking between people from the UK and China.

Participant H indicated that she had never studied “how to think properly when writing academic English essays” systematically. Participant I noted that she could not “think deeply enough” in her English essay and Participant B admitted that she found it extremely difficult to “dig out the logic behind some local phenomenon” in writing due to the cultural differences:

When writing reports (in Chinese), everyone naturally understands the underlying logic...However, without understanding the cultural

background (in the UK), it's challenging to comprehend the intended meaning of the expression.

*(Participant B)*

Answers to the open questions also associated the difficulties in writing English essays with the different reasoning processes between English and Chinese:

I think the logical thinking in Chinese and English is different. I can use Chinese to express logical relations very smoothly, however, my tutor considers that as “no sense.”

*(Quotes from open questions in the questionnaires)*

On the other hand, one-third of the interview participants also explained that they lack full comprehension regarding critical thinking, therefore, they faced difficulties while trying to navigate English writing with a critical thinking mindset.

Three participants admitted that they only heard of the concept of critical thinking when they began their studies in the UK, as they had never encountered it during their studies in China. Participant C confessed that she had no idea what critical thinking was when her tutor provided feedback requesting more critical thinking in her work:

I belong to a group of people who lack critical thinking. After I finished writing my assessment...I could not be certain whether it met the requirements (of critical thinking) or not.

*(Participant C)*

Participant C further emphasised her efforts to grasp the concept of critical thinking and even sought clarification from her tutor. However, she revealed that the conversation only left her feeling more confused than before:

I even went to ask the tutor what critical thinking is and how I could demonstrate it in my writing. They simply advised me to write about the thinking process I went through.

*(Participant C)*

Despite making genuine efforts to comprehend critical thinking, Participant C found

the concept to remain unclear. She expressed her frustration, explaining that she did not include her thinking process, such as her questions and doubts, in her writing. However, the feedback she received suggested that her demonstration of critical thinking was still lacking.

Participant C also shared a similar yet ‘unspoken’ example of her struggle with critical thinking during a cast project. Although she did not explicitly mention “critical thinking” in her narrative, the content itself reflected this challenge:

(In China) we do not need to express ‘conflict’ in a documentary cast, but here in the UK, lecturers place a strong emphasis on it. I found it challenging to identify a conflict in the documentary casting.

*(Participant C)*

Another example from Participant N also illustrated that some participants struggled to demonstrate critical thinking in their English writing due to the thinking process itself.

Participant N expressed her belief that any published paper must be reasonable:

I find it (academic writing) quite challenging, and the most difficult aspect for me is critical thinking. This part is really difficult for me. We (Chinese students) often believe that if someone’s work is published, it must be reasonable and valid ... when you ask me to critically think about it and question whether it is entirely correct, I find it even harder.

*(Participant N)*

#### *b) Applying theories to the research*

Apart from above mentioned applying academic thinking, three interview participants also struggled to apply the theories they had learned to their research in order to address specific research questions. Participant N, an architecture major, admitted that her biggest challenge throughout her studies was incorporating published literature into her assignments and using these theories to solve real-world problems in her design.

The participants further explained that the cause of this issue was the differing academic

conventions between China and the UK. Participant M, another architecture major, clarified that her experiences in conducting design projects at a UK university were very different from those in China:

In design-related disciplines, academic publications (in China) may not require heavy scholarly content. However, the UK still needs logical reasoning and structure for design projects.

*(Participant M)*

Not only in design projects, but participants studying social sciences also provided similar explanations regarding their experiences when writing essays in their discipline:

In China, writing papers tends to be more relaxed, often requiring less theoretical basis. (In the UK) writing social science papers emphasises theoretical foundations.

*(Participant H)*

### ***5.2.2 Experience in conducting research***

Another shared struggle among participants was conducting research for their assessments, whether during the dissertation stage or for assignments throughout their studies. Their main challenges included applying appropriate research methodology and citing and referencing literature.

#### *i. Struggles with designing and conducting research*

Based on the qualitative data, some participants struggled with designing and carrying out research for their dissertation. They described their experience during the dissertation stage as “puzzled during the whole process.” To illustrate, Participant C was majoring in documentary, her dissertation was to produce a 25-minute documentary project. She had a clear idea of what she was going to cast, but was very confused about what she was going to include in her reflective review of the cast:

My score on the assignment is always lower than the casting project. I

am puzzled by academic writing, I really have no idea what I should write down.

*(Participant C)*

In addition, one-third of the interview participants struggled with their dissertation as they failed to fully grasp the concept of methodology, particularly how it functions as a key component of research design to facilitate data collection. To give an example, Participant J struggled to understand research design, and the methods used to generate data for her dissertation. In the interview, she expressed uncertainty about the appropriate number of participants required for her dissertation, without realising the necessity of developing a sample strategy and discussing the advantages and disadvantages of her chosen approach. Participant N claimed to have based her methodology on existing literature; however, her project lacked sufficient citations and references to support her design, which led to her failing the design module.

As a result, the participants attributed their confusion in writing dissertations to insufficient guidance on how to approach their research. Participant C revealed that she found writing a literature review extremely hard even after the writing workshop led by her tutor:

The tutor did provide guidance. However, it was useless to me... For instance, when writing the literature review, I found it challenging to truly understand how I should approach it and what should be included.

*(Participant C)*

Participant K revealed that he encountered obstacles in various aspects of the dissertation writing process, including data collection, analysis, literature search, and the use of Harvard referencing. As a result, he also expressed uncertainty about meeting the academic expectations, as he lacked writing samples that he could follow:

Basically, I don't know what they (supervisor) want from me. There is no sample text, and they (supervisor) didn't provide any examples... I thought I put a lot of effort into it (writing the essay) and wrote a

substantial piece, but in the end, it turned out not to be what they wanted.

(Participant K)

ii. *Citing and referencing literature for research*

a) *Struggle with quoting and referencing*

For one thing, regardless of participants' language proficiency or major, they found quoting and referencing academic material difficult. During their first three months of study in the UK, 40% of participants struggled with quoting and referencing. Unlike other learning experiences, participants from different disciplines showed minimal variation in their scores for this task (3.96:4.02:4.11). An independent samples t-test (assumptions met) indicated that language proficiency made little difference,  $t(8) = -1.80$ ,  $p = 0.11$ , as participants with both higher and lower proficiency reported nearly identical scores (4.04 vs. 4.03) for this task, as shown in Figure 5.6.

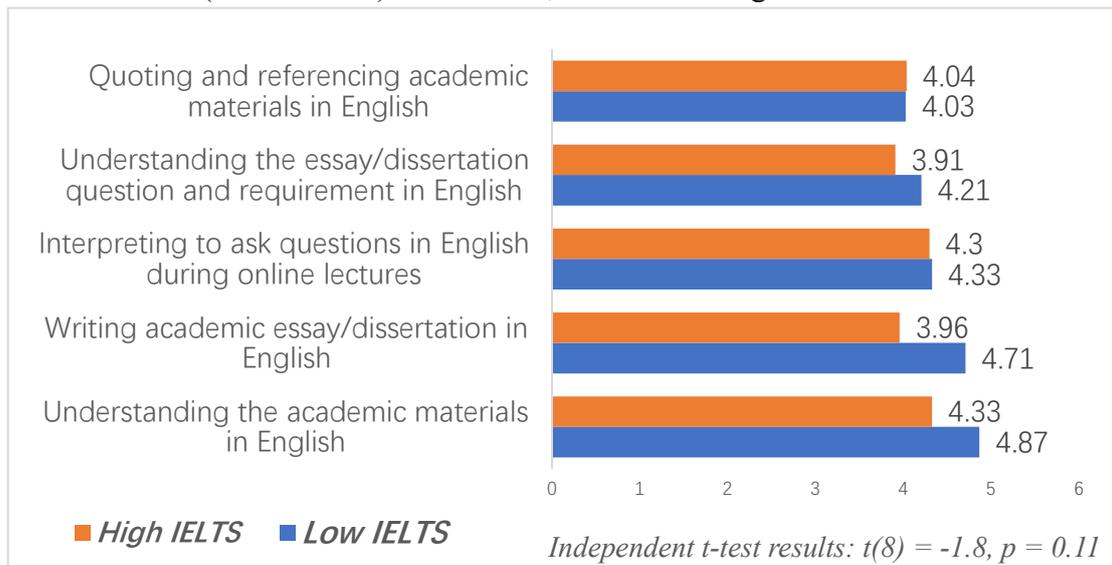


Figure 5.6 Time 1 differences in statements: Low IELTS vs. High IELTS

Although participants with prior study experience in the UK found referencing less challenging than those without (3.75:4.09), Participant I, who completed one year of undergraduate study in the UK, admitted that she found referencing very difficult even during her previous studies:

It is obvious to me that referencing has been an issue since undergraduate study. What I got from my tutor then was that my references were unsupportive and invalidating.

*(Participant I)*

Moreover, three out of the 16 answers to the open questions in the questionnaires pointed out that referencing was extremely difficult. Insignificant academic referencing and referencing misconduct were also mentioned in the open questions.

*b) Lack of understanding of literature referencing in academic practice*

Furthermore, over half of the interview participants questioned the necessity of references for every academic endeavour and found it hard to understand the purpose of citing sources in the academic work. Participant K was baffled when he realised that in the academic articles, the authors could not have their own opinions, and their ideas were “all pieced together from various sources.” He further exemplified this by recounting a conversation that took place earlier between him and his lecturer in class:

For instance, in one of my classes, I proposed an idea that the lecturer appreciated, finding it quite unique. However, they asked where my idea came from. I told him it came from my own thinking, but he wanted evidence and literature to support my idea.

*(Participant K)*

Rather than describing the requirement of references as a part of academic rigour, he preferred to label it as “rigidity”:

I think it is a kind of rigidity. If that is the case, without new ideas, there won't be room for fresh perspectives or novel theories to emerge. Because they (new ideas) can't just come out of thin air, they must be supported by something (from others).

*(Participant K)*

Participant E expressed a similar point of view, referring to referencing as “somewhat silly” because it restricted his freedom to express ideas without constraints:

Why do you always have to rely on others' viewpoints? It feels like when I'm writing my paper, I have to read so many articles written by other scholars, and then I have to rewrite and organise their work. It feels more like organising what others have done rather than expressing my own ideas. I just can't grasp it, and I'm suffering because of it.

*(Participant E)*

Apart from Participant K and Participant E, both studying subjects in humanities, Participant L from the School of Architecture also faced the same issue:

...(My lecturer) asked me whether I have found any references in the literature to support my design. However, (I told them) this idea is something I came up with on my own. Then I was told that I still need to improve in this aspect (referencing).

*(Participant L)*

Lack of understanding regarding the function of literature referencing caused a common complaint among some participants, particularly concerning the requirement to include references in the presentations they delivered during class. Participant E went as far as expressing frustration because he had given the presentation without using a draft, yet his grade was much lower than his classmates' due to the absence of references.

### **5.3 Experience with learning engagement**

The third theme of experiences among Chinese international students at UK universities pertained to their learning engagement. It explores how their preferred or taken-for-granted learning approach encountered challenges in a different learning environment. This is important as it underscores how their learning process could be impacted during the cross-cultural transition. It was further divided into three types of learning experiences: self-motivated learning, independent learning, and interactive learning.

### ***5.3.1 Experiences with self-motivated learning***

This section demonstrates participants' unfamiliarity with self-motivated learning during their first three months in UK universities. They struggled with understanding assessment expectations that required initiative and often sought direct instructions from educators.

#### *i. Struggles in understanding the assessment expectations*

During their first three months at UK universities, participants reported difficulties in understanding assignment requirements, particularly in tasks requiring self-directed learning. This issue was especially pronounced among students from the School of Architecture. As shown in Figure 5.7, a one-way ANOVA was conducted after checking assumptions, which revealed a significant difference in reported challenges across the Schools,  $F(2, 15) = 6.24, p = 0.0107$ . Although participants from the School of Architecture reported fewer overall challenges than those in the other two Schools, they rated the difficulty of understanding essay and dissertation questions in English as higher than participants from the School of Journalism, with scores of 4.05 and 3.89 respectively. This was identified as the second most difficult academic task among participants from School of Architecture, suggesting that interpreting assignment expectations remained a key challenge despite otherwise lower reported difficulty levels.

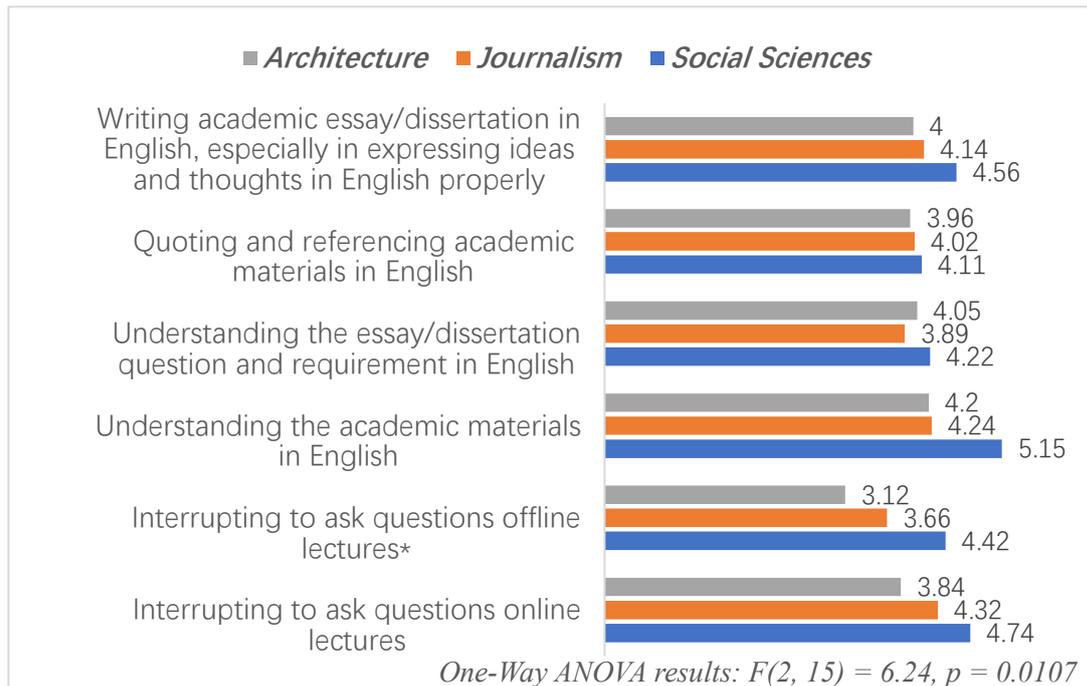


Figure 5.7 Time 1 difference in statements: Schools comparison

According to the interviews, participants found architecture subjects challenging due to the varying academic expectations between China and the UK. Participant M implied that the requirements for assignments in the UK were opposite to those in China:

I found that the course requirements are very different from those in China... (in China) the teacher would give you a very specific question, so you could complete the task following their definite requirements. Here (in the UK) the teachers only provide you with a direction and you should find these questions yourselves.

(Participant M)

This experience was not limited to participants from the School of Architecture. Participant I from the School of Social Sciences shared a similar explanation for her difficulty in understanding academic requirements in the UK:

In China, there is a strong emphasis on forcing oneself to memorise terminology and study diligently. In the UK, I sometimes feel more passive because there are no specific requirements.

(Participant I)

Responses to the open questions further supported this statement, noting that educators in the UK did not provide students with specific exam questions. Instead, they were expected to find answers themselves. Just as Participant K described, passing assessments in the UK was not as easy as it had been back in China:

In China, you can pass the assessments without much effort. In the UK, studying requires significant dedication and motivation.

*(Participant K)*

ii. *Limited guidance and non-directive feedback from educators*

Another finding indicated that participants experienced self-motivated learning through differing guidance and feedback in the UK. With less explicit instruction and the absence of direct “yes or no” feedback, some participants felt confused, while others appreciated the approach.

a) *Limited instructional guidance*

In the first interview, half of the participants noted that lectures often overwhelmed students with excessive information and ideas while lacking clear guidance and essential knowledge points. Participant C even raised concerns that she was not receiving any useful information during the lectures, emphasising that this was very different from her learning experience in China.:

My former study experience in China was more of a rote learning style, or more exam oriented. They (educators) would directly summarise the important aspects of a particular topic and tell the students directly. However, when you come to study here (in the UK), you would feel that after attending a lecture, there were no significant points given (to you).

*(Participant C)*

Other participants also shared a similar feeling towards the different learning and teaching styles between the UK and China. They emphasised that the lecturers in the

UK predominantly offer inspiration rather than clear instructional guidance in class. Participant G implied that lecturers would rather encourage students to nurture their own thinking than provide them with instructions:

In China, lecturers and tutors would explicitly state what we (the students) are going to learn and provide us with detailed explanations. However, here the lecturers only give us an outline or a framework, allowing us to develop our own thoughts and ideas.

*(Participant G)*

Participant M used a metaphor to describe the differences between educators in the UK and China:

I feel that in China, the relationship between educators and students is more like a client and service provider, where the educators set the requirements in class, and the student is expected to fulfil them. In contrast, in the UK, it is more like conducting research (yourself), where nobody knows exactly what issues may exist or how many issues there are. It is up to you to explore and investigate the topics that truly interest you.

*(Participant M)*

Notably, some participants expressed a preference for a greater emphasis on self-motivated learning in the UK. For instance, Participant I later explained that, during her studies in China, she sometimes lacked self-motivation to learn; however, in the UK, she described herself as a “learner”, who was genuinely engaged in the learning process. Participant D also highlighted that she enjoyed the teaching style in the UK, which encouraged student input, whereas, in China, the emphasis was on input from the educators.

#### *b) Non-directive feedback*

In addition, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clear, directive feedback from their educators on their assessments. Participant J mentioned that her

dissertation supervisor did not provide clear-cut feedback to determine whether her work was right or wrong during the tutorial:

Every time I present my dissertation proposal or plan to my supervisor, they just say “sounds good” or “sounds okay”. So, I felt so confused about whether my work was good or not.

*(Participant J)*

For participants studying design-related programs, feedback from tutors held greater significance. Participant M confessed that she highly valued the feedback provided by the tutors during these tutorials:

I prefer my tutor to explain in more detail and more specific ...their feedback is too general. Therefore, I often feel somewhat confused.

*(Participant M)*

Participant N failed her core architecture design module, and she pointed out that the tutor did not point out her issues earlier. In her opinion, her tutor should make her aware that she might fail by the end:

I feel that tutors are different (in the UK). Chinese tutors would clearly point out to you: You haven't met my standard, be careful! They will let you know what you are lacking (to achieve a passing grade). However, here (in the UK), the tutors only provide feedback related to your work. I mean, they just feedback on the part of the design you make.

*(Participant N)*

Both Participant M and N were also confused about which feedback they should adapt to, since they could receive different suggestions from different tutors towards the exact same design project. Participant M even admitted that she paid less attention to the feedback received from tutorials after nine months of study in the UK:

Two of my tutors always have different opinions. Other classmates also complain about this matter. When the teachers' opinions differ, you just follow your own ideas.

*(Participant M)*

Nevertheless, Participant K, from School of Social Sciences, felt that without clear “right or wrong” feedback, he was encouraged to develop his own understanding by his tutors:

When I was studying in the university in China, I felt my teachers were authorities... whatever they said was considered final, and you couldn't question or doubt them. However, here (in the UK), when you raise a question, the teachers won't tell you if it is right or wrong. Instead, they will help you to think by asking “If it's like this, how would you perceive it?” So, I feel that the teachers here are more inspiring. They won't dictate right or wrong; instead, they encourage you to weigh the options, form your own values, and develop your own understanding.

*(Participant K)*

### ***5.3.2 Experiences with independent learning***

Besides self-motivated learning, the UK academic environment also placed greater emphasis on independent learning, which were different from participants' preferences. Findings of this research showed that, compared to their non-Chinese peers, they preferred to study in groups and appeared to be less independent and creative in their studies.

#### *i. Preference for studying in groups*

The quantitative statistics in Figure 5.8 show participants' changing perceptions of group presentations over time. At Time 1, most students agreed that conducting group presentations was relatively easy, with mean scores of 3.15 for online presentations and 3.29 for offline presentation. However, by Time 2, this perception shifted, with mean scores falling to 2.0 for online and 2.4 for offline presentations, indicating disagreement and suggesting that participants no longer viewed group work as easier.

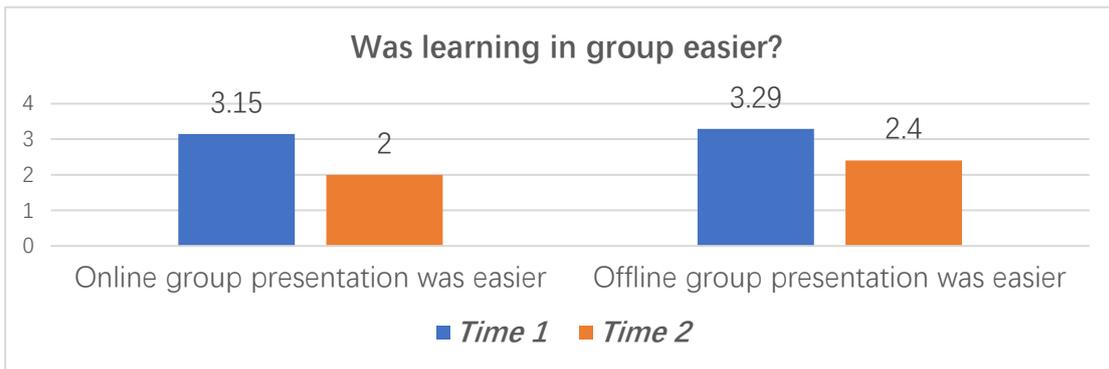


Figure 5.8 Means of perceptions on group presentation: Time 1 vs. Time 2

Also, the response to the questions of the favour of group presentation and group writing assignment demonstrated a parallel pattern with the above figure. As depicted in Figure 5.9, most participants affirmed that they opted to make presentations and write papers in groups, achieving a much higher mean score of over 3.0 during their first three months of study in the UK. However, after another six months, participants showed a preference for working independently rather than engaging in collaborative group settings.

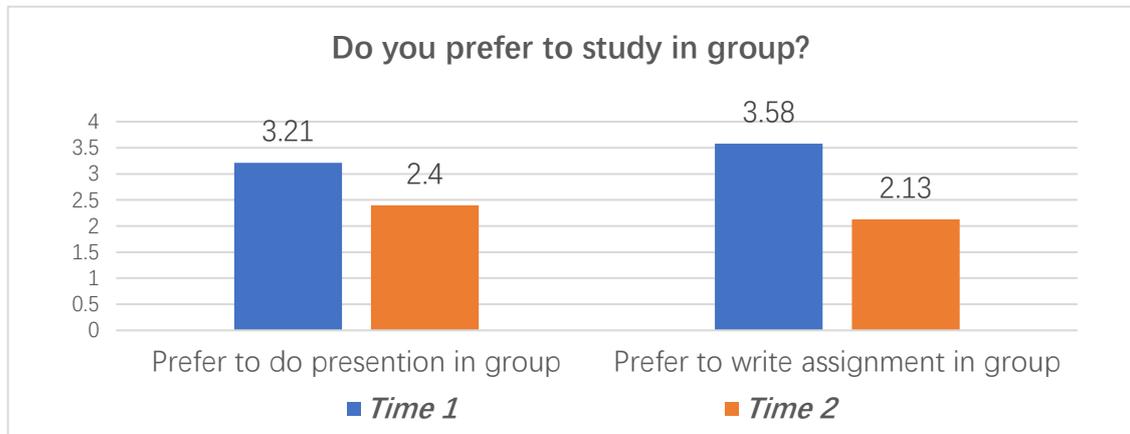


Figure 5.9 Means of preference of group presentation/writing assignments: Time 1 vs. Time 2

Interview participants further revealed that, in terms of the learning content, there was no difference between studying in groups and studying individually, but most participants preferred group work due to its inherent benefits during the first few months of their studies in the UK.

All three participants from School of Architecture admitted that they were partial to engage in projects in groups because they could gain support from the group members. Participant L mentioned that he appreciated the opportunity to consult with one mature and “teacher-like” group member, who provided him with valuable support and advice. Participant M believed that working with others allowed for skill enhancement through shared knowledge and experiences:

I feel that my logical thinking is not very strong, I tend to have a more scattered thinking pattern. However, my group member was a person with a very clear logical thinking ability... We complemented each other well. They could help me to turn abstract ideas into a coherent framework, while I could provide inspiration and divergent thinking. By combining our strengths, I believe we work together efficiently.

*(Participant M)*

Other participants from different Schools also pointed out that they found group work advantageous as it helped them to reduce individual workload and enhance efficiency. Participant G mentioned that she had received a lot of help from her classmates, including providing her with useful advice on how to write papers and reports in English.

After six months, some participants expressed that they became more comfortable with learning independently. Participant M, who enjoyed the complementary brought by group members before, admitted that she started to conduct more independent projects in the second term, and started to “selectively consider other classmates’ opinions.” Participant H and Participant J both considered that to complete a project by themselves was “much more efficient” than working in a group.

*ii. The independence and creativity of non-Chinese peers*

Meanwhile, participants also observed that their non-Chinese peers tended to be more independent and creative. For example, Participant C’s group project was to cast a

documentary in a group of two, she indicated that it was never easy for her to work with her British peers in a group:

Everyone (Chinese students) tends to find it easier to collaborate with Chinese students, as their ideas and thoughts are similar. Moreover, British students tend to be more independent. For instance, when both of us need to go to cast the same scene (for the group project), a Chinese group member might say: I can accompany you. Whereas British students sometimes feel they have their own tasks, which makes it harder to schedule a time to communicate (and work) with each other.

*(Participant C)*

She further added that there were also differences between the presented group works of Chinese and British students, where local students tend to approach group projects with more individualism:

When we are required to hand in two separate documentaries from the group projects, the British students often seek out their own individual stories within the same theme. While Chinese students prefer to work together and create a single film that is later edited into two separate versions.

*(Participant C)*

Participant E's experiences were very similar as he described working with non-Chinese peers as a process of "encountering different perspectives that may lead to interesting and unique insights." He also emphasised that non-Chinese students were much more independent, which made it hard to collaborate with each other:

Even though we are in the same group, there is limited, or not at all, collaboration among us.

*(Participant E)*

Some participants noted that their British peers consistently brought fresh ideas to the table. Several participants pointed out that there was a greater abundance of brainstorming and idea generation when engaging in group discussions with their non-Chinese classmates. Participant J indicated that local British students had "much faster

thinking processes” during group work. In addition, Participant H admitted that when she was in a group discussion with Chinese students, she failed to “perceive a significant impact of diverse perspectives”. She further explained that her non-Chinese classmates were more creative in selecting research topics compared to her Chinese peers:

When we need to choose a top for research, Chinese students immediately write about topics of Chinese education; while local students may have various ideas, such as civic awareness among church youth or a local museum’s significance.

*(Participant H)*

### ***5.3.3 Experience with interactive learning***

Over the course of nine months studying at a UK university, quantitative data revealed that more than 67% of participants generally disagreed with the notion that online learning became easier. Meanwhile, most interview participants admitted struggling more with online learning activities, as they found it more difficult to communicate and interact. They expressed a preference for an interactive learning approach, where effective communication and a stronger sense of engagement were possible.

#### *i. Preference for a more communicative learning approach*

For one thing, a number of the interview participants emphasised that the lack of facial expression and eye contact during online learning made it difficult for them to communicate with educators and peer students. Participant B narrated online communication as a “typing environment”, which was a much worse environment than in-person communication:

During in-person lectures, the lecturers would be able to read your facial expression, so they could know whether you have understood their words or not... My classmates did not talk a lot during the online group discussions, so the communication was ineffective in the typing

environment.

*(Participant B)*

Participant I expressed a similar opinion and indicated that she was more favourable to in-person group discussions because of the more productive outcome:

I also like in-person group work because it is more productive. During online group discussion, some student would mute their speaker and refuse (to communicate).

*(Participant I)*

Participant G considered face-to-face discussion important because it enabled real communication:

During online communications, I would prefer to be an outsider. But during face-to-face discussions, I would feel that it is real communication between people.

*(Participant G)*

Other participants also revealed that face-to-face communication was more efficient. For example, in-person tutorials were more “direct”; “easier to capture tutor’s points”; and enabled them to “receive timely feedback”.

## *ii. Interaction and engagement in learning*

In addition, participants also preferred conducting academic activities in an environment with more effective interaction and greater engagement in learning. Four out of the 14 interview participants found it hard to concentrate during online lectures due to a lack of engagement. Participant F explained that online lectures were not “real” lectures due to the absence of the feeling of “being in the classroom.” Participant B even postponed her studies until after COVID-19 because she did not want to attend all lectures online, as she found in-person lectures to be more “vivid.” Furthermore, in terms of making presentations in class, Participant I expressed her preference for in-

person presentations because they gave her a stronger sense of presence:

I felt that I was inclined to offline presentation because I could see the reaction of the audience. I felt that my work was respected, and I had a stronger sense of presence.

*(Participant I)*

Some participants preferred offline presentations because of the interaction between the presenter and the audience. Participant K mentioned that this interactive environment even helped to cover up some of his weaknesses:

I preferred to do the presentation on site, because it was more interactive and natural. I noticed that even my in-person presentation had some imperfections in English (expression), but these could be overlooked through other factors, such as the overall atmosphere presented at the site.

*(Participant K)*

In addition, several participants indicated that they could gain more productive outcomes after face-to-face interaction with their educators. They highlighted the effectiveness of in-person tutorials, noting that tutors provided more personalised support, such as Participant C's tutor revising her written assignments sentence by sentence; Participant J's supervisor outlining each step of her dissertation; and Participant F's tutor offering detailed clarifications tailored to her specific questions.

#### **5.4 Experiences with interpersonal dynamics**

The final theme of participants' experiences related to interpersonal dynamics, as they had to communicate and interact with educators and peers in both public and private academic settings. This theme further developed into three sub-themes: fear of exposing weaknesses in public, prioritising group success, and encountering a different teacher-student relationship compared to their previous experiences in China. These sub-themes focused on their knowledge-construction process through interaction with others in a

different sociocultural environment.

### 5.4.1 Fear of exposing weaknesses in public

Findings indicated that participants tended to avoid exposing weaknesses in public. Further evidence suggested that the primary weakness they feared revealing was mainly their limited English language proficiency, rather than other shortcomings.

#### i. Fear of asking questions in class

Participants demonstrated a fear of interrupting lecturers to ask questions in class, and it was even more evident when the lectures were delivered online. Statistics suggested that interrupting the lecture to ask questions was identified as the most difficult aspect of online classes, with a mean score of 4.31. Over 56% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that it was difficult to seek further information by interrupting the online lecture, as shown in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Statistical breakdowns of online lecture survey results - the first three months

Difficulties in	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
Understanding the content in English	3 (3.75%)	20 (25%)	15 (18.75%)	28 (35%)	12 (15%)	2 (2.5%)	3.4
Interrupting to ask questions	1 (1.25%)	11 (13.75%)	8 (10%)	15 (18.75%)	32 (40%)	13 (16.25%)	4.31
Asking questions during Q&A	2 (2.5%)	17 (21.25%)	17 (21.25%)	19 (23.75%)	20 (25%)	5 (6.25%)	3.66
Expressing ideas and feelings in English	8 (10%)	16 (20%)	16 (20%)	12 (15%)	22 (27.5%)	6 (7.5%)	3.53

A closer examination of participants' language proficiency and previous study experiences revealed similar frequencies of interrupting to ask questions during online lectures, regardless of English language skill (4.3:4.33), with no significant difference,  $t(8) = -1.80$ ,  $p = 0.11$ . Additionally, shown in Figure 5.10, an independent t-test was conducted after checking assumptions to compare participants with and without prior

UK study experience regarding interrupting to ask questions. The difference was minimal and not statistically significant,  $t(10) = 2.01, p = 0.07$ , with scores of 4.13 and 4.33, respectively.

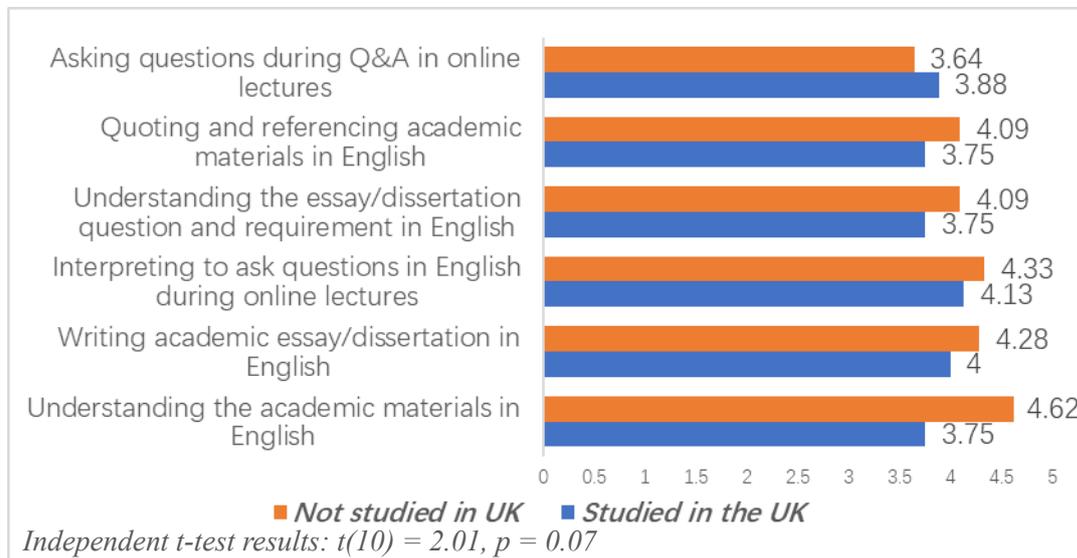


Figure 5.10 Time 1 difficulties differences in statements:

*Studied in the UK vs. Not studied in the UK*

Almost half of the interview participants admitted that they felt nervous to ask lecturers questions. Participant I also explained that she struggled to ask lecturers questions due to a fear of exposing her grammatical and spelling mistakes in English in public. Participant K emphasised that the reason why he was afraid to raise questions in class was due to his limited skills to express himself in English:

I was afraid that my expression was not clear enough, so that would cause a waste in everyone's time. Because my expression skill was not good enough, I would need extra time to organise my language.

*(Participant K)*

Participant K further stated he would rather go to the lecture after class and ask questions individually. Some other participants expressed the exact same preference because they “felt embarrassed to stop the lecture and raise questions in front of the

class.”

*ii. Avoiding making mistakes in class*

Though participants generally preferred offline learning due to more interaction and engagement, one-third of the interview participants favoured online learning, finding it less stressful and challenging. For one thing, the participants preferred online learning environments because the non-real-time format reduced the risk of making mistakes in public. For example, online presentations could be recorded, allowing time for rehearsal and editing, which alleviated stress compared to in-person presentations.

Two interviewees preferred using the chat box during online lectures, as it was less disruptive than raising their hand in person. This feature made it easier to ask questions, particularly for those hesitant to interrupt in face-to-face settings. Participant K further explained that the chat box allowed him to avoid the embarrassment caused by his limited language ability:

You can type your questions...you can have more time to think about the expression of your questions. To ask questions directly will be difficult for Chinese students, because we do not have good English language ability...During online lectures, you might use five minutes to think about a question and type it in the box, so the lecturer can see it and answer it. But during an in-person lecture, you might need three minutes to express a question, and the others even do not understand what you want to say. It is so embarrassing to waste time.

*(Participant K)*

On the other hand, Participant I had a completely different view. While Participant K appreciated the chatting box for concealing his language shortcomings, Participant I found typing questions in English stressful and “ashamed” because errors in grammar or structure would be publicly visible in the chat for an extended time:

I found it troublesome to type. Because when we type a question in English, we will need to think about the vocabulary and sentence

structure. When I type the question in English and then send it out, it will be presented (in the chatting box) for long time so everyone could see it. I would feel very ashamed if I used incorrect structure or grammar.

*(Participant J)*

The apparent contradiction in experiences with the chatting box reflected different preferences, both rooted in the shared desire to avoid public mistakes stemming from language challenges during their cross-cultural transition.

*iii. Spokesperson in the group*

Another discovery in the context of Chinese students engaging in group learning was their tendency to designate a ‘spokesperson,’ typically someone with stronger English skills to represent the group when communicating with group members from other nations or working on assignments.

For example, Participant N indicated that the group discussions became more intense in the later part of her study, necessitating English as the primary language for communication. Despite most group members being from China, she discovered it easier to express herself in English during this term. because “someone spoke out for her”:

There is someone speaking for you, conveying your thoughts to others (foreign group members)...One of them (spokespeople) is from Taiwan, the other one is the student who completed their undergraduate studies in the UK. Their spoken English is more fluent compared to others.

*(Participant N)*

Participant G’s comments on her experience of group work shed further light on the reasons why Chinese international students may require a ‘spokesperson’ to communicate on their behalf in English:

When I speak English in front of fellow Chinese students, I feel embarrassed...I worry about making mistakes (in expressing in English)

when communicating with Chinese students, and some (Chinese) classmates may even correct my mistakes. I feel that Chinese people are very particular about pronunciation.

*(Participant G)*

She even felt more comfortable speaking English with foreigners compared to her Chinese peers, because they were not picky about her language mistakes:

I prefer to speak English to foreigners (alone), even if I make mistakes (in English language). They (the foreigners) generally don't expect themselves to be fluent in Chinese, so they appreciate my English-speaking abilities. However I would feel embarrassed when I make mistakes when speaking English to my Chinese classmates.

*(Participant G)*

In addition to oral English communication during group discussions, the experience of having a 'spokesperson' also extended to written English assessments. Participant F shared her experience of working with classmates from Hong Kong and Indonesia, in which they tended to appoint group members with stronger language skills to take on the responsibility of writing in English:

When it comes to writing academic reports and drafts, we clearly notice the English proficiency of students from Hong Kong and Indonesia is better. We tend to trust their English skills more as they appear more native-like...we assigned them to take the responsibility of writing the drafts.

*(Participant F)*

However, Participant F had to admit by the end that "more native-like" English skills did not earn them a better mark, because "the scores ended up being even lower than ever before."

#### ***5.4.2 Prioritising group success***

This section explores participants' experiences of prioritising group success, including

their preference for achieving a unified outcome and compromising for the group's benefit.

*i. Achieving a unified outcome*

Regarding participants' experience of group learning, they generally preferred group work over individual study due to the support from peers (mentioned in Chapter 5.3.2). However, some also noted a key disadvantage: the difficulty in reaching consensus and aligning opinions, which hindered achieving a unified outcome. Participant A admitted that inconsistency was a common problem in group presentations:

The allocation of time among team members may not be equal, and achieving a unified thought process can be difficult. There is a risk of inconsistency in the presentation when each individual contributes their own ideas and perspectives.

*(Participant A)*

Participant I provided an example of her previous group presentation experience with conflicts between the group members:

Achieving a unified viewpoint in a group can be challenging. However, in group presentations, it is essential for everyone to come together and present as a cohesive unit. In the past, my experience was to allow each member to work on their respective parts and then combine them. While this method resulted in a lack of overall coherence. By the end, I asked my team member that your part was not suitable, could you please change it? They just replied: I did not want to change.

*(Participant I)*

Other participants also preferred to carry out the work by themselves because they were afraid of the “uncooperative team members.”

*ii. Compromising for group interest*

Almost half of the interview participants also implied a sense of compromise when

collaborating with Chinese students on group projects. For instance, Participant D admitted that even though she intended to form a group with students from other nations, she still needed to work with her Chinese classmates in class because they were her friends:

However, there's no way around it. You always have a few Chinese classmates with whom you have a particularly strong bond and enjoy spending time together outside the classroom.

*(Participant D)*

Participant L highlighted that his Chinese group member always pushed him to keep up with the process of the group work:

For instance, within my study group... there is a Chinese girl who is a bit pushy. If I work on a group assignment with her, she expects me to keep up with her pace, even though her progress is a bit too fast for me.

*(Participant L)*

### ***5.4.3 Equitable and unbiased relationship with educators***

The following section presents how participants navigated equitable communication with educators and their experiences with impartial grading.

#### *i. Equitable communication with educators*

Almost all the interview participants emphasised that their communication with the lecturers and tutors was equal. They described it as “talking with friends” and “without any sense of distance and pressure.” Nearly one-third of the participants mentioned that they felt comfortable communicating directly with their lecturers and tutors during tutorials, as they had no reservations or concerns during conversations.

Participant L admitted that his communication with the lecturers was much “more boldly and directly” in the UK compared to his former academic experiences in China.

Participant H mentioned that everyone in her class knew that their educators were “approachable and down-to-earth.” Participant A did not worry about saying anything wrong during tutorials, as he did in China, because his tutors were open to different views and opinions and never “reject students’ viewpoints directly”. Participant K implied that he felt more confident communicating with his educators because they were not judgmental:

No matter how stupid a question may seem, it is not considered stupid. Therefore, I feel more confident, and I just want to seize this opportunity to express myself (during the tutorials) and get answers to the things I do not understand.

*(Participant K)*

Participant H further supported this viewpoint and explained that the teacher-student relationship in the UK was very different from that in China:

(In China) we need to respect teacher, there is a distance between student and teacher. In the UK, student will just ask teacher any questions without any hesitation.

*(Participant H)*

After nine months of study in the UK, participants became more comfortable with in-person tutorials. They found them more practical and beneficial. Three interview participants noted deeper discussions, as lectures and tutors “got to know them better” and appreciated more personalised guidance. They enjoyed the practical insights and found tutorials helpful.

*ii. Impartial marking*

On top of the communication, participants also pointed out that the educators tended to provide feedback in a more impartial manner, without taking personal emotions into consideration. Participant B was impressed that her tutors could “keep students’ personal and academic life distinctly separate”:

When it comes to marks and feedback, they (tutors) do not consider their personal relationship (with the students) at all. I believe this is a great approach. In our country (China), things might get mixed up. If a teacher is familiar with you, they might consider the personal relationship with you when marking the assessments and providing feedback. However, I really appreciate that foreign teachers (in the UK) simply assess based on the merits. If my work is not good enough, then it's not good enough indeed. I could know exactly where I need to improve (from their feedback).

*(Participant B)*

Participant C also believed that marking in the UK was more “human-centred” than China, because her lecturers discussed the marking process with the students and provided opportunities for them to mark together.

On the other hand, two other participants did not value this impartial manner. For example, Participant H implied that her tutor did not take students' personal attitudes into consideration when providing feedback compared to the educators in China, which made her frustrated:

I feel that my grades should be influenced by my attitude and effort (towards the assessment). I even complained to my parents that I should gain a mark over 80% if it is in China.

*(Participant H)*

She further attributed this to the “cultural differences” in communication, such as how to express politeness, which hindered her ability to build a closer relationship with her educators. “If I were in China, I would be much closer to my supervisor,” commented Participant H.

## **5.5 Chapter summary**

This chapter explored the learning experiences of Chinese international students at a UK university, with a focus on their struggles and challenges in academic settings. The chapter emphasised the themes of participants' experiences, detailing what they

encountered and how they interpreted these experiences. The insights from this chapter demonstrated the diverse and multifaceted experiences Chinese students encountered as they adapted to the academic culture in the UK.

The next chapter will build on these themes, concentrating on how individual participants' varied experiences influenced their overall cross-cultural transitions, using longitudinal qualitative data from interviews. It will also include an in-depth analysis of two participants who failed, exploring their experiences within the sub-themes developed in this chapter.

## **Chapter 6 Cross-cultural development: the impact of experiences on cross-cultural transitions in a UK university**

This chapter presents the longitudinal qualitative data gathered from interviews, focusing on participants' development throughout the cross-cultural transition. Their experiences are organised around the themes established in the previous chapter, providing a detailed account of how their experiences unfolded over the academic year.

In addition, two focused investigations are included on participants who experienced academic failure. These two investigations were not part of the original plan but emerged naturally during the study. Their experiences highlighted experiences of greater struggle, adding depth to the overall understanding of cross-cultural transition.

This chapter highlights how the findings address the last two sub-questions of the research by illustrating the development of participants' experiences and their interpretations throughout this process.

### **6.1 Application of English language**

In the experiences related to the application of the English language for studies, the findings revealed two different trends: some participants gradually overcame these difficulties, while others experienced limited progress.

#### ***6.1.1 Overcoming language barriers through active participation***

Based on the qualitative data, about one third of the interview participants gradually overcame the challenge of expressing themselves in English after nine months of study. However, they explained that this was not due to improved language skills, but rather a conscious decision to stop worrying about language and cultural differences. They focused on expressing themselves and actively engaged in group work with non-Chinese students. For example, Participant B, who cried during her first group

discussion with local students, described how she managed to gradually engage in the discussion with support from her peers:

They (British group members) were all very friendly and helped me by speaking slowly or using simpler words, which enabled me gradually adapt to this environment.

*(Participant B)*

After nine months of study, Participant B found that she no longer had difficulties working on group assignments with non-Chinese peers, especially in the application of English language:

After one semester, we (British classmates and I) could work on group assignments without any difficulties or obstacles. Initially, there was a sense of discomfort. But now there is a significant adjustment, especially in terms of language usage.

*(Participant B)*

She was even excited to share that she had taken on a more active role in the group, having found her voice and started helping her British classmates:

This semester I feel that communication is becoming smoother, and I am also voicing my own opinions (during group discussions). Previously, I would often listen to what the British students said and then follow along. However, this semester, I am taking more initiative and playing a more active role. I express my ideas and engage in discussions with them. For example, when we were working on a podcast, I had expertise in that area, so I helped them when they didn't understand certain aspects. I also explain things to them, and it feels like the roles have somewhat reversed. Previously, they were always helping and explaining things to me, and now it's like I'm introducing them to the knowledge I'm familiar with.

*(Participant B)*

Participant D addressed that she found communicating with group members in English more smoothly in the second term, as she had eliminated her concerns about cultural differences:

I was less focused on issues arising from cultural differences. As a result, everyone was able to communicate and understand each other, leading to more discussions without getting caught up in things, such as not understanding certain local expressions.

*(Participant D)*

Participant E explained that communication in English became much smoother and more natural as he actively expressed his opinions. He attributed this improvement to his better adaptation to the environment, noting that language proficiency was only a small part of the overall change:

I believe that 20% of the change is due to my improvement in English, while 80% is because my mindset has shifted, making me better adapted to this environment.

*(Participant E)*

Participant E also pointed out that he was more engaged in local life and was invited to a local wedding, which also improved his oral communication. He was no longer troubled by his previous concerns about his lack of understanding regarding historical and political issues:

I feel that I have better integrated into local life. When I first arrived, I had very few opportunities to interact with locals unless I took the initiative. Gradually, I began meeting locals for coffee and chatting with them...I started participating in local events. This helped me integrate more into the community.

*(Participant E)*

### ***6.1.2 Overemphasis on English language expression***

On the other hand, three other participants admitted that they made little progress in language expression throughout their nine-month study, which gradually led to a reluctance to engage in group learning.

For example, Participant A, who studied the same subject as Participant B, felt that he

increasingly lost his willingness to express himself and participate. Different from Participant B's experiences, Participant A explained that he found it challenging to improve his cross-cultural communication because his English was not as fluent as that of native speakers, making it difficult for him to have a voice in group tasks:

To be honest, when working on assignments with foreign classmates, it's hard to progress in cross-cultural communication. I feel that foreign classmates often carry the load. After all, if a first-language speaker collaborates with a second-language speaker, the first-language speaker is likely to take on more responsibilities.

*(Participant A)*

Participant A further noted that he lacked a voice when working on assignments with British classmates because it was "much easier for them to handle the tasks" due to their language skills.

Participant K, who preferred not to interpret the lecturer to ask questions due to concerns about his language expression in the first term, found that his situation remained unchanged after another six months. He was frustrated that he had not improved in understanding the lecture content or communicating with his British educators and peers. He further explained that this was because his English expression was still not good enough:

Sometimes, I struggled to convey what I wanted to say during conversations with the teacher. While the teacher could understand me, I felt that I wasn't expressing myself well.

*(Participant K)*

He also compared his previous experiences of using English to communicate in China with his experiences in the UK, stating that he was "isolated":

Previously (in China), my English had improved while working and interacting with others in English. But, being here (in the UK) made me more isolated. I didn't like socialising or communicating, which led to even less communication (in English).

*(Participant K)*

## **6.2 Learning through reasoning and research**

Regarding learning experiences through reasoning and research, while the findings in Chapter 5 indicated limited progress in understanding academic material in English, several participants reported clear improvements in their writing assessments. However, some others felt increasingly puzzled after nine months of immersive study.

### ***6.2.1 Emphasis on logic and reasoning***

For one thing, three interview participants observed an obvious difference in writing academic assessments as they began to focus more on logic and reasoning in their written work. As a case in point, Participant F started to realise that “more native-like” English expressions did not result in a better mark after nine months. She further explained that the important point in writing was the logic behind expression, which earned her good marks in assessments:

I found that my language expression didn't seem to matter much. What was more important was whether I could grasp the logic behind...This semester, I got two assessments over 70%. I was surprised to discover that I didn't use particularly complex vocabulary or authentic expressions. I realised that I couldn't make significant improvements in such a short time; I just felt that I understood the logic of the assignments and was doing it correctly.

*(Participant F)*

She further revealed that the entire postgraduate program in public relations was focused on teaching the reasoning behind the subject to solve problems in the industry:

It teaches you a way of thinking that enables you to quickly grasp the logic of any industry; and then solve the problems in real life. Essentially, it fosters logical reasoning skills.

*(Participant F)*

Similar to Participant F, Participant B also received much higher marks in her

assessments after nine months of study, with many reaching 70% or more. She attributed this improvement to her ability to grasp the key logical points in academic journals, which helped her organise her understanding and enhance her reading. She also recognised the importance of logic in journalistic writing. She believed it was essential to explain the reasoning behind her writing for readers to understand her expression:

I want to explain the underlying logic of these phenomena to my British readers (in journalist writing). But my teacher may not fully understand if he lacks knowledge of the cultural background, which could make it difficult for him to grasp the meaning I am trying to convey.

*(Participant B)*

### ***6.2.2 Ongoing struggle with conducting research***

Three other participants, however, struggled more during the second term because they did not fully understand the process of conducting research. One observation about these participants was that even at the dissertation stage, they continued to grapple with the content to write in the report.

Take Participant C, for example. She expressed her confusion in writing the literature review because she did not know what to include. However, she admitted that a specific workshop on how to write a literature review had been provided by the School, but she found it useless because it failed to answer her question of “what to include in a literature review”:

The teacher’s guidance seemed no different from not saying anything at all...I later realised that I needed to read relevant literature and news reports to extract elements that could support my arguments.

*(Participant C)*

Throughout the entire process, Participant C admitted that she repeatedly asked her educator, “What should it look like?” or “What should I include?”. Even when the

feedback encouraged her to delve deeper for the reader's understanding, as "someone unfamiliar with the topic wouldn't fully grasp my meaning," she struggled to engage with these insights. Likewise, Participant H, who expressed similar confusion regarding the literature review, relied on her supervisors to give her clear instructions on what to include in each section, which enabled her to finally complete the work.

### **6.3 Learning engagement**

In terms of experiences related to academic engagement, participants initially had some struggles with self-motivated and independent learning, as this approach was very different from their previous educational experiences in China. From a longitudinal perspective, over half of the interview participants became more proactive and engaged in their learning after nine months of study in the UK, while others expressed frustration over the lack of guidance from their educators.

#### ***6.3.1 Becoming a proactive learner***

After nine months of studying at a UK university, more than half of the participants began to realise that their learning process was no longer merely following the provided instructions, which differed from their initial expectations when they first arrived. This realisation, and the subsequent change in their learning approach, eventually led to better marks in assessments compared to the previous term.

For example, Participant D admitted that if she had been more familiar with the self-motivated learning approach in the UK, she would have been able to achieve higher marks in the first term:

At first, I thought I just needed to do whatever the teacher told me to do, complete the assignments given, and that would be enough...But now, my grades this term are higher than last term, and I realise that if I had known these requirements earlier, I probably would have achieved higher marks last term as well.

*(Participant D)*

Participant M revealed that she had become more familiar with the learning approach in the UK compared to the first several months. She realised that while receiving instruction from educators was a direct way to obtain information, she could explore “many other channels to access useful data” for her learning.

Moreover, Participant I and Participant F expressed strong enjoyment in the self-motivated learning. Participant I emphasised that she felt like a true “learner” in the UK, regardless of the outcome of the assessments:

I consider myself a learner, someone who is genuinely engaged in learning. Regardless of the grades given by teachers, I am confident in my abilities.

*(Participant I)*

Participant F started an internship in a related industry during her dissertation stage. She realised that learning involved not only following instructions and requirements but also “expanding into practical applications”:

I felt I had made overall progress in my studies...self-motivated learning is encouraged here; it often means more than following the teacher’s ideas and requirements or adhering to the course materials. It also requires you to expand into practical applications...this leads to better results in terms of grades.

*(Participant F)*

Participant F used the metaphor of “grasping the hook above” to describe how she connected the knowledge she learned from literature to practical applications in real life. This process indeed also helped her to better understand English literature:

At first, when I read the literature, my mind felt blank. The words and language were like hooks above, but I didn’t have a way to grasp them. Later, after seeking out my own internship and attending activities, I began to understand their (writers’) way of thinking and logic. When I read literature now, I better grasp the reasoning behind what they are saying.

*(Participant F)*

Participant F also pointed out that in China, learning was primarily focused on obtaining a degree, which felt “painful” as students rushed to read literature. She noted that people in China often misunderstood master’s courses in the UK:

Some might say the content (of master’s degrees in the UK) is superficial because they failed to ‘grasp the hooks’ during their learning. Therefore, this course doesn’t help them, leading them to feel they aren’t learning anything.

*(Participant F)*

She expressed that it was only when she engaged in a real-life job and began applying what she had learned that she realised the tuition fee in the UK was worth it.

### ***6.3.2 Frustration arising from insufficient instruction and guidance***

About one-third of the interview participants preferred to receive the same mode of instruction from their educators in the UK as they had in China even after nine months of immersed study. They were upset that their educators did not provide clear guidance, which they believed would have helped them achieve better marks.

For example, both Participant N and Participant G highlighted that their module failures could have been avoided if their educators had given them clear warnings or instructions before submitting assessments. Although Participant C and Participant J valued their tutorial experiences with their dissertation supervisor, particularly the thorough instructions and assistance, such as sentence-by-sentence revisions and step-by-step outlines, they were still frustrated by the lack of clear and binary feedback.

Some participants noted that a clear, detailed sample assessment would be more effective than resources or workshops, as it would provide a concrete reference to follow. For example, Participant J achieved a mark over 90% in the second term by

following and imitating sample assessments; Participant K found it difficult to determine if he had met the requirements without a sample from the educators, as the assessment topic was too broad and unclear; Participant H found the university's resources unhelpful and was reluctant to use them.

## **6.4 Interpersonal dynamics**

The final theme of experiences discussed was the development of participants' interpersonal dynamics with their educators and peers during their learning experiences. After nine months of study, one key finding was that most participants had adjusted their attitudes towards teacher-student relationships, shifting towards a more balanced and collaborative relationship with their educators. This change also unconsciously turned them into more critical and motivated learners. However, four other participants felt increasingly distant from their non-Chinese educators and peers, as they preferred a closer and more personal relationship with their educators.

### ***6.4.1 A more balanced relationship***

In Chapter 5.4, it was noted that almost all interview participants emphasised that their communication with educators was more equal than they had initially expected. After nine months, some participants began to benefit from this more balanced relationship.

For example, Participant D initially felt stressed and nervous about attending tutorials with her supervisor but ultimately discovered that the atmosphere was particularly relaxed. After a few tutorials, she received more suggestions than she had anticipated:

At first, I felt pressure before attending, but once I went, I realised that my supervisor would help me think through the problems you might encounter. They provided many suggestions on how to approach things, even anticipating issues I hadn't considered.

*(Participant D)*

Participant E, Participant L and Participant M revealed that after nine months of study,

they were no longer afraid of answering and asking questions during lectures. They did not hesitate to interrupt the lecturers to pose their questions and express their ideas publicly. As Participant L stated, he became “bolder” in his communication with educators rather than simply becoming “more fluent.”

The shift towards a more balanced teacher-student dynamic was sometimes passive and unconscious, yet it led to participants becoming more motivated and critical learners. Take Participant M for example, who highly valued the feedback provided by her tutors during the first term of study, however, she was confused about which feedback they should adapt to, because she could receive different suggestions from different tutors towards the exact same design project. After another six months, she admitted that she paid less attention to the feedback received from tutorials after nine months of study in the UK, there, she was forced to think independently:

Two of my tutors always have different opinions. Other classmates also complain about this matter. When the teachers’ opinions differ, you just follow your own ideas. You decide which tutor’s opinions are more suitable for you; and use your own judgement to proceed with your work.

*(Participant M)*

She further added that her attitude towards feedback from teachers had changed because the conflicted feedback from different tutors allowed her to adopt a more objective mindset towards them.

#### ***6.4.2 Increased distance in interpersonal relationships***

On the other hand, three participants from the School of Social Sciences raised concerns that Chinese and non-Chinese students started to form separate groups for assignments and discussions after the first term. This led to a sense of “mutual exclusion.” Both Participant H and Participant I felt that other students were reluctant to engage with Chinese classmates. Participant I admitted that she felt a bit resistant and sensed disdain from her non-Chinese classmates after overhearing their judgments about Chinese

international students:

Once I overheard one of my foreign classmates say, “Why don’t we group these Chinese students together? Why don’t we then group the rest students who are native English speakers? They believe that would facilitate better communication. I felt a bit resistant and wondered if they looked down on my English skills.

*(Participant I)*

Despite this unpleasant feeling, Participant I preferred to engage in group discussions with non-Chinese students. She appreciated that through this process, everyone indeed “contributed their viewpoints”, which she found lacking among her Chinese peers, who often preferred to remain silent.

However, Participant H had a different perspective on this “mutual exclusion,” attributing it to subtle behaviours from the lecturers:

My communication with foreign students was generally positive, there was a particular foreign girl that I often chatted with during group discussions. Yet, whenever the lecturer initiated group discussions, it was clear that they were accustomed to sitting together with foreign students, leading to a subconscious tendency to group with them.

*(Participant H)*

She explained that in one class, the lecturer communicated more easily with foreign students and spoke at a faster pace. Participant H found this class particularly challenging and sensed that the lecturer was less inclined to engage with her and her peers, which heightened her sense of pressure.

In addition to her relationship with non-Chinese peers, Participant H also expressed feelings of distance from her local educators, despite their approachability:

Although foreign teachers may not have an air of authority, there still remains a mental barrier since they are, after all, the teachers.

*(Participant H)*

She preferred a closer, more personal relationship with her educators, but she felt this was impossible due to cultural differences, which further hindered her ability to connect:

Cultural differences further hinder the ability to connect with teachers, even though you recognise that they are quite approachable.

*(Participant H)*

Additionally, Participant H was dissatisfied with her assessment marks. During the first three months, she felt that the marker did not consider her personal attitudes. After another six months, she began to attribute her marks to the marker's personal preferences, as she scored 20 points lower than her classmates:

I felt that, according to this standard, I should have received a higher score. I couldn't shake the feeling that XXX (the marker of the assessment) didn't like me. Before the exam, I had this strange sensation that they looked down on me.

*(Participant H)*

In addition, another participant, Participant N, expressed similar feelings regarding the distinct teacher-student relationship compared to China. After receiving a failing mark in a core module, she felt that her marker did not have the same approach as those in China, who would typically "help" students to pass by providing clear warnings. In the next section, we will delve deeper into Participant N's experiences from different aspects.

### **6.5 Experiencing failure: two focused investigations**

This section includes two more focused investigations generated from the interview data of two failed participants, Participant G from the School of Journalism and Media, and Participant N from the School of Architecture. Both participants' experiences stood out as they represented more complex and difficult learning trajectories compared to the others. By exploring how these participants interpreted and responded to academic failure, I gained deeper insight into their experiences and the factors that shaped their

development during cross-cultural transition. These focused investigations not only informed the final two sub-questions regarding participants' interpretations and the development of their experiences, but also offered in-depth insights into the first sub-question on the challenges they faced and the factors that influenced those challenges. Their experiences were also categorised into the themes summarised in Chapter 5, with additional focus on how they interpreted the potential reasons behind their failed outcomes.

### ***6.5.1 Experiences of Participant G***

#### *i. Background introduction*

Participant G was enrolled in a postgraduate program in Political Communication at the School of Journalism in 2021. Unlike all the other interview participants, she had actually started the course a year earlier, in September 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown that year, she had to complete her first semester entirely remotely from China. In March 2021, Participant G came to the UK to study on-site for the rest of her courses, however, she had already faced failing five modules during the initial semester. Subsequently, in September 2021, she was required to resit these modules. While she successfully passed most of the resit modules, she narrowly missed passing only one module by only 2%. Regrettably, this led to her being asked to withdraw from her postgraduate course. It was during this challenging time that she contacted me and expressed her willingness to take part in the research, when she was appealing to the university for a second chance to resit the failed module.

Participant G did not participate in the survey due to its longitudinal nature, for which she was not able to meet the requirements for the survey participant, she still willingly volunteered for the interview because she found the research to be meaningful. In an email she sent to me, she expressed the following sentiment:

I hope that your research will gain attention from the university, shedding light on the difficulties faced by international students who lack the opportunity to study on-site in an English-speaking environment during the pandemic, so as to provide support to more Chinese students (studying in the UK).

*(Participant G)*

I was deeply moved by her email and, as a result, decided to conduct an interview with her in January 2022. During our conversation, I was surprised to learn that her English language proficiency was quite impressive, with an overall IELTS score of 7.0, which exceeded the course requirement. Additionally, she had completed her bachelor's degree in political management in China, so she emphasised that she had studied subjects in political science before.

As we delved further into her academic experiences in the UK, she shared with me the entire year-long process of pursuing her postgraduate study and the potential reasons she believed led to her failure in passing the modules.

*ii. Application of English language: challenges in clear expression*

One of the significant challenges that Participant G faced was expressing herself clearly in English. This difficulty extended not only to her assessments but also to her communications with tutors beyond academic matters:

When I was experiencing depression and anxiety and having to go to the hospital, it was challenging for me to accurately express my emotions and feelings in English to my tutors. As a result, my tutors overlooked my issues.

*(Participant G)*

Another example she shared was the feedback she received from her lecturers, indicating that her writing lacked clarity:

My tutor would often remark that my expression was unclear, even though I believed I had conveyed my thoughts effectively.

*(Participant G)*

Participant G acknowledged that even though she faced some difficulties in English language application, she still believed that her primary reason for failing was not due to language barriers but rather a lack of understanding of the academic expectations in the UK. She disclosed that after coming to study in person in the UK, she only failed one assessment. However, this piece of essay was already proofread by her local classmate. This native English speaker helped her refine her English and make her expression clearer.

iii. *Learning engagement: lack of interactive and self-motivated learning*

During the interview, Participant G further attributed her failure to understand academic expectations to differences in learning engagement approaches during her studies in the UK. In the first term, she linked this difficulty to a lack of interaction with educators, as she was studying remotely:

The reason I didn't meet the (passing) requirement before was that I didn't know how to write academic essays since I had not come to the UK, and no one told me (how to write).

*(Participant G)*

However, when she came to the UK to study on-site, she attributed her lack of understanding to unclear instructions from her lecturers, which differed significantly from her previous experiences in China:

I feel that the teachers here provide some points during their lectures, but the main focus is for students to think independently. In China, teachers would clearly explain what we were going to learn that day. But here, the teachers give us an outline and a direction, and it's up to us to figure things out on our own.

*(Participant G)*

She further explained her understanding of the difference between the academic requirements in China and the UK was actually via discussion with local peers, not the

educators:

When we are writing essays for the humanities subjects in China, we are required to find answers to questions and provide solutions. However, in the UK, what is needed is critical thinking and presenting our own viewpoints. This led to me failing all five papers when attending online classes in China. It was only after coming to the UK and discussing with local students that I finally knew the key to success in English academic writing.

*(Participant G)*

iv. *Learning through reasoning: struggles with referencing and critical thinking*

Apart from understanding academic expectations, all Participant G's struggles to meet these expectations fell into the theme of learning through reasoning, as she had found referencing and applying critical thinking in her studies challenging.

For one thing, referencing literature for assessment proved challenging for Participant G. In addition to struggling with a slower reading speed for English literature, she encountered difficulty in adopting a different approach to reading and referencing in the UK compared to her previous experiences in China:

Back in my home country (China), undergraduate thesis writing was not as rigorous, and I used to skim through literature just to find something to copy. However, here, I had to learn how to read literature in a scholarly manner.

*(Participant G)*

This struggle with referencing further compounded Participant G's challenges in passing the assessments. She described a situation where she came close to "receiving a zero mark" in her modules due to potential academic misconduct. Since she had to translate all English articles into Chinese to read them, when she cited the literature and translated it back into English for her assignments, it resulted in a high similarity report of 46% in one of her essays. The unintentional similarity was flagged by the plagiarism

check, raising concerns about academic misconduct, which led to her being called to a meeting to explain the situation. Additionally, when asked to submit a report, she turned in a very casual piece lacking references and formal writing. As a result, the report failed because it did not meet the basic requirements for an academic assessment.

For another, Participant G also admitted that she had difficulty in applying critical thinking in writing. She had compared her writing with that of other Chinese international students from a different course who had received higher marks. However, she did not consider that their work demonstrated more critical thinking than hers:

I actually don't quite understand it. I have also read the papers of other Chinese students from different majors, and I find that their writing is similar to mine. Their arguments don't seem to be significantly more critical than mine, yet they received 70% whereas I only got 54%.

*(Participant G)*

When I attempted to investigate further whether the lower marks were due to cultural differences, Participant G was certain that her performance had not been influenced by cultural differences. She further explained that her educators were well-versed in recognising and understanding such differences:

I don't think it's the cultural difference. Our professors in our field are quite objective. They understand our different cultural backgrounds and can comprehend them.

*(Participant G)*

v. *Interpersonal dynamics*

In addition to the aforementioned experiences, Participant G mentioned another noteworthy point. She pointed out that due to remote learning during the initial months, she missed out on a lot of information, including the existence of tutorials. It was not until next June that she finally discovered the availability of tutorials. However, by that

time, she had already submitted all her assignments, leaving her with no chance to benefit from the support and guidance tutorials could have provided. As a result, she had never attended any tutorials with her educators, and she deeply regretted this decision. She indicated that this could have been another contributing factor to her academic struggles and failures:

I haven't attended any tutorials (in person). I also didn't book any online tutorials, and I deeply regret it. If I had talked to XXX (the marker of failed module) at that time, I might not have failed.

*(Participant G)*

Furthermore, Participant G admitted that she had only met her personal tutor in person once, and that was when she submitted her appeal for a second chance at resitting. It was the students' service staff who assisted her in contacting her personal tutor on that occasion. She explained that the majority of her lectures were conducted online, and she preferred to remain "invisible" online. She also refrained from actively participating in class discussions with her peers. As the only Chinese student in her class, communication became more challenging for her:

During seminars, Chinese students tend to be reserved and not actively participate. I think it's rooted in our Chinese culture, which tends to be more introverted...In June, we had a face-to-face gathering (with the classmates). It was quite evident that Asian students, including a classmate from Dubai, and some Indonesian students were not as talkative when others were constantly engaged in various discussions. I believe it's mainly a cultural background difference that might make Chinese students less inclined to express their thoughts openly during seminars.

*(Participant G)*

Although Participant G emphasised that the lack of face-to-face interaction with educators and classmates due to remote learning resulted in missing out on many opportunities and channels to obtain information, she also acknowledged her hesitancy to engage in online discussions. She felt uncomfortable speaking online and preferred

offline communication because she feared that during communication online, her tutors and lecturers might “dislike” her. This preference for offline communication further contributed to her sense of isolation and difficulty in fully participating in the academic environment during her studies in the UK.

### ***6.5.2 Experiences of Participant N***

#### *i. Background introduction*

Participant N started her postgraduate study in Architecture Design in September 2021. I first interviewed her in February 2022, when she had already spent a few months immersing herself in the new academic environment. In her initial introduction, Participant N shared her academic background, revealing that she had previously obtained a bachelor’s degree in architecture from China. She also achieved the distinction of ranking within the top 2% of her college. Her enthusiasm for her chosen path was obvious during our first interview, and later she even showed an eagerness to explore the possibility of pursuing a PhD degree in the UK.

However, Participant N’s academic journey took an unexpected turn several months later. Following the completion of her taught modules after the second term and the release of marks, Participant N encountered a profound setback: she discovered that she had not passed one of her core design modules, which was the most important module of her postgraduate program. The academic regulations of the School stipulated that she could not resit this specific module. Instead, she was required to repeat it in the following year and was unable to progress to the dissertation stage.

In the face of this disheartening setback, Participant N grappled with frustration and disappointment. In a bid to support her, I encouraged her to find out the potential reason behind her failure. To allow her the time needed to overcome this hurdle, I conducted the second interview with her in late August, allowing us to explore her experiences

and the potential underlying reasons for her failure together.

I also found that Participant N's challenges also aligned with the themes of experiences identified in the previous chapter. Participant N faced different challenges at Time 1 and Time 2. Initially, her main struggle was expressing herself clearly in English and understanding the academic expectations. By Time 2, while she still found English expression difficult, she recognised that her issues with academic reasoning were a key factor in failing the core design module.

ii. *Application of English language: challenges in expression*

Like Participant G, Participant N also highlighted that using English to express herself was the most significant challenge, especially when introducing her design project during presentations. In the initial interview, she attributed this difficulty to her limited English vocabulary. She metaphorically depicted this experience as “hitting a snag”.

Nonetheless, upon the arrival here, I faced a puzzling obstacle. Frequently, my mind would go blank, leaving me struggling to recall the exact words I needed. I would often hit a snag and find myself taking an extended period to ponder (about the vocabulary).

*(Participant N)*

In the second interview, Participant N persisted that expressing herself in English still ranked among the most daunting tasks, despite her engagement in part-time work at a shop:

The most imposing obstacle, in my opinion, arises from my current level of English proficiency. I still cannot express myself well enough (in English). While it has been enhanced through interactions at the boba tea shop, it still falls short of meeting the requirements of scholarly discussions.

*(Participant N)*

iii. *Learning via reasoning and research*

The module Participant N failed required her to formulate a project related to urban commons. While at first, she attributed her failure in the module to a lack of logical and critical reasoning in her design. However, after discussing her feedback, she agreed that the primary reason was her misunderstanding of how to cite literature for a research project.

a) *Experiencing obstacles in logical reasoning and critical thinking*

Initially, during the first interview, Participant N admitted that she felt confused about the requirements of this design project, attributing this to differences in state policies between the UK and China:

I was perplexed for quite a while. In China, the landowners, administrators, and sponsors are government entities ...However, in the UK, many lands are privately owned... In China, it's taken for granted that stakeholders and administrators are the government. This was quite challenging for me when I first started (the course).

*(Participant N)*

Participant N considered that these disparities made it even harder for her to grasp the assignment questions. She characterised it as “I could understand each word, but I couldn't discern the specific context it referred to within the sentence.” For instance, she found the assignment topic of urban common quite challenging to comprehend:

Our topic was urban common, which essentially means a shared public space, but our commons encompass various elements that need to be accessible and inclusive for a multitude of people. The concept of ‘commons’ isn't just a public space. I grasped this concept after a whole term.

*(Participant N)*

She further explained why she found it difficult was actually due to the different

reasoning between China and the UK:

For example, in China, you just need to give them (the public) a space, and they can start dancing. But here, you have to design something, and you also need to consider privacy issues. Different mindsets play a role. These differing perspectives are evident when you discuss or work on projects with local classmates during workshops.

*(Participant N)*

In the second interview, after receiving her failed mark and feedback, Participant N felt her failure was due to a lack of logical reasoning, especially when compared to other passing projects. Participant N shared the peer review she got from her classmate, who pointed out that her design portfolio lacked a deduction process:

I showed my work to a classmate, and they said that they could not really understand why I chose to create this architectural design via my portfolio. They also mentioned that the process of my deduction seems somewhat unclear and hard to follow.

*(Participant N)*

Participant N further mentioned that she had taken a look at the portfolio of a former top-performing student. She noticed that their logical reasoning appeared much more comprehensive compared to hers. She then expressed a sense of bewilderment, wondering how others could excel in this aspect, as her design lacked the structured deduction seen in her peers' work. She then admitted that she felt more stressed during the second term, as tutors placed greater emphasis on reasoning over design:

In the second term, I noticed that tutors would inquire more about the literature's support, and they would also ask more questions about your logical reasoning. It's not like before, where I just needed to provide a rough design. I felt that there was more pressure in the second term.

*(Participant N)*

In addition to the logical reasoning, Participant N also admitted that meeting the requirement for critical thinking in assessments was hard:

We usually assume that if someone's literature is published, it is acknowledged to be valid. I might be able to incorporate it based on how it fits into my practice, but if you ask me to critically think about it, to consider that it is not fully correct, and then to analyse it, I find that quite tough.

*(Participant N)*

*b) Failure to cite literature in the research project*

In Participant N's urban commons design project, she chose to develop a public space specifically tailored for individuals with communication difficulties. The feedback she received from the reviewers indicated that her project could benefit from enhancing the connection between her research findings and the architectural design. However, based on my conversation with Participant N, along with the feedback and portfolio she shared, my concern was that her failure stemmed from a misunderstanding of the role of literature in her design, resulting in improper and limited citations.

For one thing, Participant N just presented her design and showed the literature to the tutor, without effectively integrating these sources to support her design concepts in her design. Participant N admitted that her design lacked evidence because she presumed that her reviewer would easily comprehend and follow her thinking process:

I have always thought that the things I have in mind are known by the tutors, and I can just proceed (my design project) with my ideas. However, in reality, what the tutor required was that every step you take should be supported by evidence, even from the beginning part of formulating research questions. This was something I completely overlooked. Although the tutor did mention the need to reference literature, so I did find the articles and presented them to the tutors in each stage.

*(Participant N)*

Despite her tutor expressing concerns about the evidential support for her design concept, she still failed to fully comprehend their underlying intention:

(During the tutorial) the tutor asked, “Where did you get this information about your concept? Where is the literature?” I showed him, and I explained why it (the design) needed these elements. I think I have already included this in my work.

*(Participant N)*

Additionally, Participant N failed to use literature to support her design, despite it being the chosen methodology for her research project. She listed “literature” as her methodology in her portfolio introduction; nonetheless, her entire presentation and design did not adhere to this methodology. In fact, she barely quoted or referenced any sources in her work. Rather, she solely relied a lot on “text description”, resulting in the reviewer’s feedback pointing out that she had not “consulted enough literature and precedents on acoustic design”<sup>1</sup>.

When I shared my perspective with Participant N and explained the role of citing references as the methodology for her secondary research, I specifically highlighted that she relied on “literature” as the evidence to support her design methodology, rather than considering other approaches such as surveys, experiments, or field trips for data collection. In this case, the support for her design should have come from existing published literature or precedents’ designs. However, she had not emphasised this aspect in her work. Participant N’s reaction was having a sudden realisation, exclaiming, “I see! Now I understand!” This response showed that her major issue, more than just lacking logical reasoning skills, was a genuine misunderstanding of design and conducting research.

Participant N further admitted that, based on her previous experience in Chinese universities as an architectural design major, she had assumed that simply explaining her design concepts would be sufficient. However, she finally realised that this

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<sup>1</sup> *Quotations were taken directly from the feedback provided by the reviewer regarding Participant N’s failed design research.*

approach did not align with the expectations of academic design research in the UK.

iv. *Learning engagement: expecting explicit and binary instructions*

As Participant N was pursuing studies in architectural design, therefore, a significant portion of her tutorials involved discussions about design projects with tutors and lecturers. Moreover, due to the structure of her course, she received feedback from several tutors on the same design. Consequently, one of her grievances was the inconsistency in feedback from different tutors, leaving her uncertain about which direction to pursue. Participant N later admitted that she regretted that she paid too much emphasis on the feedback and advice given by her tutors:

I didn't pay enough attention to the content taught in the lecture, I prefer to gain more individual guidance for my design work.

*(Participant N)*

Participant N emphasised that her tutor had instilled a “misconception” in her, leading her to believe that she had fulfilled numerous tasks. She went on to elaborate that this “misconception” primarily arose from her tutors never furnishing her with explicit guidance concerning the design challenges she faced:

Rarely did they (tutors) pinpoint specific issues, such as indicating that a problem was rooted in the drawings, which I could promptly rectify...However, they did not provide feedback in determining whether my design was heading in the (correct) direction or not. Instead, they just advised me to recognise the sensitivity of the subject...Their feedback was board and I found myself uncertain about where to begin.

*(Participant N)*

Participant N also expressed dissatisfaction, noting that if she were in China, a tutor would have alerted her from an early stage about the possibility of failing the module. If so, she wouldn't have been as surprised by the eventual outcome. She attributed her surprise to the fact that the educators in the UK never provided her with any negative

feedback, creating another kind of “misconception” for her.

v. *Interpersonal dynamics*

Participant N also unconsciously feared exposing her weaknesses in public settings. This fear manifested in her reluctance to ask questions in class and her tendency to rely on spokespersons to facilitate communication with local students in English. Furthermore, Participant N had an issue that she was not aware of initially – she had established an unequal dynamic between herself and her educators from the beginning.

a) *Exposed weakness in the group*

On one hand, Participant N implied that she refrained from speaking up in class when the lecturer encouraged them to ask questions. She expressed a fear of revealing her limited English proficiency, which led her to opt for posing inquiries individually after the class:

After the class, I can ask the lecturer questions. But during the class, I dare not. Mainly because I’m worried about not speaking English well, or just afraid of asking questions in public.

*(Participant N)*

She also shared her experience of one-on-one tutorials for discussing feedback on her design project, which she found more beneficial as it allowed her to avoid “losing face” compared to group tutorials:

I felt like each session was more personal. Since others weren’t listening, I felt less like losing face.

*(Participant N)*

On the other hand, during the second interview, Participant N conveyed that group work had become more manageable for her because there was someone to voice the ideas on behalf of all the Chinese international students in the group:

Almost every group work, we communicated in English, and the communication was much better than before...There was someone speak for you (in English), explaining your thoughts to others (non-Chinese students).

*(Participant N)*

When I inquired further about how they selected the spokesperson for the group, Participant N hinted that it was primarily based on their superior English language proficiency:

One of them is from Taiwan, and the other is a Chinese student who completed their bachelor's degree in the UK. Both of them are more fluent in spoken English.

*(Participant N)*

In this case, the “spokesperson” primarily served as a linguistic intermediary, aimed at concealing their weak English language proficiency and facilitating communication with non-Chinese students.

*b) Inequitable communication with tutors*

Another issue, which Participant N may not have been fully aware of, was her default acceptance of teachers' authority. In other words, she also assumed that there was a superior-subordinate dynamic between teachers and students.

For example, as mentioned in earlier sections, Participant N placed significant importance on her tutors' feedback and defaulted to considering their suggestions as authoritative. Moreover, when discussing the experiences Participant N had during class presentations, she mentioned that she would “immediately feel nervous upon seeing her lecturers sitting there.” When explaining the differences between giving presentations and attending tutorials, she noted that presentations were formal and introduced a greater sense of distance between herself and the lecturers, so she expressed a preference for tutorials:

In tutorials, you can ask anything directly and you can keep asking questions. Because the distance between the teacher and you is closer, making it easier to discuss any issues.

*(Participant N)*

In summary, Participant N tended to perceive a shorter distance when communicating with her educators during tutorials, while sensing a greater distance during presentations. In both scenarios, she didn't anticipate an equitable level of communication with her teachers.

## **6.6 Chapter summary**

This chapter further explored the interview participants' experiences and their development during their cross-cultural transition in a UK university from a longitudinal aspect according to the main themes in Chapter 5.

In terms of the application of English language, some participants successfully navigated language challenges through active participation, while others struggled due to an excessive focus on English expression. For learning via reasoning and research, several improved their writing by emphasising logic and reasoning, whereas others suffered from ongoing struggles with conducting research. Regarding learning engagement, after nine months in the UK, some participants became more proactive, although a few complained about the lack of guidance. In interpersonal dynamics, most participants developed more collaborative relationships with their educators, enhancing their critical thinking and motivation, though some felt distant from their non-Chinese peers. The chapter also included two focused investigations from participants who had failed, highlighting how their varied experiences contributed to their unsuccessful outcomes.

The next chapter will analyse participants' experiences through the lens of social constructivism, Dewey's theory of experience, and Mezirow's TLT, incorporating in-

depth analysis, discussion as well as personal reflection.

## **Chapter 7 Discussion: swimming in a different pool**

Chapter 7 presents a discussion of all the findings, integrating insights from social constructivism, Dewey's theories on experience, and Mezirow's TLT. This chapter analyses the four key themes of findings, drawing connections between theory and practice. Through my own personal reflections, I use the allegorical reflection of 'swimming in a different pool' to illustrate my understanding of the learning experiences of Chinese international students during their cross-cultural transition.

### **7.1 Application of English language: adopting a different breathing method**

#### ***7.1.1 The transition to a different language environment***

##### *i. The most immediate linguistic change*

In terms of participants' experiences related to English language application during their cross-cultural transition, the shift from Chinese to English as the primary language of instruction was arguably the most immediate and perceptible change. This linguistic transition was particularly evident in the initial months of studying in the UK, with nearly all participants reporting difficulties in expressing their thoughts in English, both in writing and speaking. In addition, participants even admitted that due to difficulties expressing emotions in English, their struggles with depression and anxiety were overlooked by the educators. Such experiences align with existing literature on the impact of language proficiency on international students' academic performance and overall adjustment (Heikinheimo and Shute 1986; Badur 2003; Wu and Hammond 2011; Taylor and Ali 2017; Holliman et al. 2024).

Within a social constructivist framework, learning occurs through dialogue within a sociocultural context (Freire 1970; Vygotsky 1978; Mezirow 1991). Hence, once the participants began studying at a UK university, immediately, they had to use a different language to communicate within a new sociocultural environment for the purpose of

knowledge construction. This could further explain why they initially struggled to express themselves in English during their first few months of study. For participants, the shift in language also marked a broader change in the social context for dialogue. Some, for instance, recognised that their difficulties with English communication stemmed from a lack of familiarity with the UK's cultural, historical, and political context.

*ii. The shift from language acquisition to language as a tool for learning*

In the participants' original learning environment in China, English was treated as the subject of study, while Chinese served as the medium for them to learn. However, upon entering a UK university, English was no longer the learning objective. As Ballard (1996) explains, Chinese international students undergo a shift from learning English as a second language to using it as a tool for academic success. From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is built through experience. For Chinese international students, their prior experience positioned English as an object of study rather than a tool for learning. As a result, when they arrived in the UK, they were unfamiliar with using English as a medium for active learning in a university setting. This unfamiliarity could be seen as a lack of experience in engaging with learning through the English language, as their previous experiences focused primarily on acquiring English as a second language.

For example, Participant B indicated that the "actual application of English" during her studies in the UK was very different from passing the IELTS exam. Participant B's interpretation helped to explain the quantitative data, which showed no significant difference between participants with higher and lower IELTS scores, suggesting test scores had limited impact on their learning experience. This explanation also highlights the difference between learning as a passive acquisition process in a simulated context and learning as an active and engaging experience. While IELTS preparation focused

on developing English proficiency for an academic setting, for Participant B, it remained a constructed scenario designed to assess language skills on paper rather than a real learning experience. In this sense, it was still a process of learning English as a second language to pass a test.

Studying in the UK, on the other hand, requires the functional use of English as a tool for meaning-making. This aligns with Dewey's (1934) notion of learning through "doing," where knowledge is actively constructed through real-world engagement. In this case, English is not just an object to be studied but is used as a tool for learning. This differs from the relatively rote and disengaged approach of preparing for an exam in a simulated environment. Meanwhile, preparing for an English test prioritised exam-focused material over deeper engagement. This also reflects traditional education, which, as Dewey (1938) argues, emphasises isolated skills and static aims, leaving little room for interaction with the real world.

### ***7.1.2 The disorienting dilemma and the impulsion***

#### *i. The disorienting dilemma in a different language environment*

The change in the language environment triggered an immense potential for transformation for participants, as they had to shift from viewing English as an object of learning to using it as a tool for knowledge construction. This challenge stemmed from their prior use of English as a learning objective, which conflicted with the new expectation of actively using it to acquire knowledge. Consequently, this mismatch suggested a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow 2000), referring to the profound discomfort participants experienced when their existing habits of mind were challenged, namely, English was no longer a subject to be learned. This mismatch also indicated resistance, prompting the participants to pause, reflect, and reconsider the situation (Dewey 1934).

For example, Participant B cried during her first group discussion in English with native speakers because she felt isolated as "the only Chinese person in the whole group,"

highlighting her lack of real-life experience in using English as a medium to construct knowledge via dialogue. This discomfort was also evident in the experiences of other participants, who preferred discussing topics with fellow Chinese students rather than local peers, reflecting their initial struggle to adapt to using English in an engaged dialogue.

My findings further indicated that most participants experienced the next few phases of Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning, which can also be understood as a process of pausing, reflecting, and re-evaluating the situation after encountering resistance (Dewey 1934). After encountering a disorienting dilemma, some participants experienced guilt, frustration, and anxiety during their first months in the UK. For instance, some participants expressed anxiety during presentations, believing their non-Chinese peers had superior skills due to language advantages. Many participants also began to critically assess their sociocultural assumptions, realising that the challenges they faced stemmed not only from language proficiency but also from differences in cultural, historical, and linguistic backgrounds, as well as distinct writing and expression habits between Chinese and English.

All of the above further demonstrates that the transition to study in a university in a new language environment initially held a "transformative potential" (Brown 2009, p.504) for most of the international students.

*ii. The impulsion to express for educative experiences*

Apart from the potential for transformative learning, transition to study in a different language environment also brings great potential for initiating an educative experience that fostered individual growth (Dewey 1938). Since an experience starts with an impulsion to express ourselves (Dewey 1934), participants' difficulty in expressing themselves in English to educators and peers could also be explained as an initial impulse, marking the start of an experience in cross-cultural transition.

This difficulty, in some ways, hindered participants' communication with MKOs, obstructing their ability to construct knowledge through dialogue, which was essential for reflection on their past experiences. It also, to some extent, prevented individuals from finding their voice in discourse (Mezirow 2012). One example was that Participant A expressed reservations that he lacked a "voice" when working on assignments with British classmates due to their superior language skills; while Participant B noted that after nine months of immersive study, her communication with peers became smoother, allowing her to "voice her own opinion." The different experiences further demonstrated that dialogue was "indispensable" to learning (Freire 1970, p.88), enabling individuals to discuss and understand their socio-cultural environment. In the case of Participant A, the lack of "voice" in dialogue with British classmates might hinder their ability to fully engage in the learning process and uncover real-world knowledge.

These findings suggest that transitioning to study in an English-speaking environment in the UK somehow might hinder international students' ability to express themselves, further leading to an obstacle in constructing knowledge through discourse. This challenge prompts them to reflect critically on their past experiences and consider their current situation (Dewey 1934; Mezirow 2000). The details and examples of how this can lead to educative and transformative learning experiences will be discussed in the following section.

### ***7.1.3 The change of role: from language learner to language user***

Based on the participants' longitudinal experiences, I found that progression to the next phase of transformative learning was driven by the fifth stage of exploring new roles, relationships, and actions, which proved crucial following earlier experiences of disorientation, self-examination, critical reflection, and recognising others' perspectives (Mezirow 2000). In the context of their cross-cultural transition at a UK

university, this phase involved shifting from being language learners to active language users.

*i. Becoming an English language user*

The qualitative findings indicated that certain participants gradually overcame the challenge of expressing themselves in English after nine months of study. This turning point was primarily driven by their transition to the role of language users, which allowed them to engage more actively in dialogue with MKOs (educators and peers in the UK).

For example, both Participant D and Participant E experienced transformation when they stopped focusing on linguistic and cultural differences. These marked their critical reflection on underlying assumptions (Mezirow 2012), as Participant E described it, a “shift of mind,” which involved letting go of concerns about historical and political differences in English vocabulary. Through this, Participant E engaged in dialogues and took the “initiative” to interact with locals, which was the process to uncover knowledge through discussion about the socio-cultural environment around them (Freire 1970). Meanwhile, Participant B’s experiences clearly illustrated how she managed to engage in reflective discourse (Mezirow 2000; 2012) by asking peers to speak slowly and use simpler words, and ultimately, she reversed her role into a language user. Through this process, she achieved her goal of acquiring and sharing knowledge in English through interpreting each other’s experiences.

In these cases, when participants stopped fixating on their language proficiency to actively engaging in dialogue, it marked a transformation in their process, turning English into a mere tool for communication. At this point, they took the initiative and transitioned into users of the language, a shift that helped them integrate more fully into their learning environment.

*ii. Less will to express*

Compared to the participants above, some others continuously reflected on their past process as English learners in China, often focusing on English language proficiency in communication and fearing that their own abilities were inadequate. As a result, they gradually lost the will to express themselves through dialogues with non-Chinese peers. These participants did not progress to the fifth phase of transformative learning, remaining stuck in recognising their discontent without exploring new roles. They continued to act as English learners, even in an English-speaking environment.

For instance, Participant A gradually withdrew from group discussions with local peers, feeling his English was less fluent than native speakers. He attributed his reduced engagement to the language gap and recognised limited progress. This marked his retreat from reflective discourse, causing him to lose his voice in both personal and social settings (Mezirow 2012). Similarly, Participant K felt his English improvement was minimal due to limited communication and admitted feeling more isolated. This highlights how clinging to the previous premise of English as just a subject to learn prevented international students from combining and reframing ideas in reflective dialogue (Mezirow 2012). It not only indicates a missed opportunity for learning but also resistance to the new environment, as without interaction between their inner thoughts and external environment, they might become more disconnected, as Participant K described, leading to isolation and hindering further growth (Dewey 1938), which will be discussed in the next section.

**7.1.4 The transformative and (mis)educative learning experiences**

*i. The transformative learning experiences*

The findings further revealed that after adopting the new role of a language user, some participants engaged in reflective discourse and became more active in dialogues with MKOs. Over time, they found that communication in English became smoother,

boosting their confidence in self-expression. For example, Participant E found it easier to communicate with locals, while Participant B, gaining confidence, took on a “more active role” within her group, helping her British peers understand topics in which she had expertise. These experiences marked their growing competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships (Mezirow 2000). Especially for Participant B, her new role facilitated a shift in group dynamics, where she confidently found her voice and began contributing knowledge her local peers did not have.

Through the transformation of their process, their premise of the role of English in their studies also evolved to become more flexible, reflective, and open, enabling them to solve problems in the new language environment (Mezirow 1990; 1996; 2012), such as completing group assessments more effectively with local peers. They transformed from viewing English as an objective to learn in their previous Chinese-speaking environment to a tool for conducting reflective discourse and constructing knowledge in an English-speaking environment.

On the other hand, the failure to explore new roles in using English for reflective discourse resulted from some participants’ reluctance to shift from the role of an English language learner, with a continued focus on accuracy, such as grammar and pronunciation, rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue. For example, Participant G expressed concern about making mistakes when speaking English with Chinese peers, who were particularly attentive to pronunciation. Similarly, Participant K often feared his English expressions were unclear in communication. This reluctance to transform could bring low self-confidence in the application of English and isolate them from the local MKOs (Trice 2007), made it more challenging for those participants to engage in reflective discourse, hindering their acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing plans in the new environment (Mezirow 2000). A clear example of this was observed in the School of Social Sciences, where participants noted that, after nine months of study, Chinese students and others “started to form separate groups for

assignments and discussions.” This failure to progress in transformative learning led participants to primarily interact within their own ethnic groups, relying on familiar language habits and resisting integration into the new language environment. As a result, they missed the opportunity to build new experiences through dialogue with non-Chinese peers, preventing these experiences from shaping their actions in the new setting (Mezirow 2000).

*ii. The educative and miseducative learning experiences*

Moreover, this exploration and transformation into the role of English language user contributed to an educative experience for their further development. Their experiences began with a desire to express themselves in English and culminated in more active dialogue, leading to deeper interactions with their new environment (Dewey 1938). For example, by finding her voice in conversations, Participant B’s dialogue with local peers allowed her to generate new experiences by connecting her inner thoughts and feelings with the local peers. This, in turn, fostered greater engagement, as seen in Participant E’s sense of full integration into the local community. These experiences became the “moving force” in their cross-cultural transition: increased engagement (interaction) with the environment led to new experiences, which formed a foundation for further development (continuity), making the experiences deeply educative (Dewey 1938, p. 38). Published literature further supports this claim, suggesting that international students feel more at ease participating in class discussions and group activities, which can enhance their academic performance (Young and Schartner 2014; Taylor and Ali 2017).

However, these failures to take action and pursue change ultimately contributed to miseducative experiences. By not actively engaging in dialogue or seeking new ways to communicate, these participants limited their interactions with non-Chinese peers and educators, restricting opportunities to construct new knowledge through reflection.

For example, the mutual exclusion between Chinese students and others prevented reflective dialogue, hindering their reflection on experience and not allowing them to reshape their original impulse (Dewey 1938), thereby reducing their continuity in experiences. Moreover, it diminished participants' learning processes by obstructing the interaction between their internal conditions (thoughts and ideas) and the external conditions of the academic environment in a UK university, as seen in Participant K's isolation due to his refusal to engage in more communication. According to Dewey (1938), such experiences lack continuity and interaction, hindering progression toward further experience, thus constituting miseducative experiences.

### ***7.1.5 Personal reflection***

#### *i. The allegorical reflection: breathing a different air*

When my son's cast was removed after a fracture, the doctor permitted swimming but restricted other activities, explaining that water's buoyancy supports rehabilitation by reducing strain while still providing resistance. This experience made me reflect on Chinese students' learning in the UK. Social constructivism viewed knowledge as built through interaction, similar to a swimmer moving through water's resistance and support. Learning was a continuous interaction with the environment, just as a swimmer interacted with the water in the pool. Thus, the transition from China's environment to the UK can be seen as an allegory of a swimmer moving between pools.

In this context, I used the allegory of breathing a different quality of air to represent adapting to a new language for learning. The language environment of a UK university, where international students are immersed, becomes like a new swimming pool, requiring them to adjust to the unfamiliar air. Just as air is essential for swimming, the English language become the 'new air' they have to breathe as they navigate this environment. The key is not to focus on the quality of the air itself, but to learn to breathe differently in order to swim effectively. In other words, the challenge is to adjust

their breathing method for efficient swimming, rather than attempting to change the air to match what they were used to in their original environment.

*ii. My personal experiences as an English language user*

Reflecting on my own experiences, I saw how exploring a new role positively affected my language application during my cross-cultural transition because I clearly remember the moment when I decided to change my role to an English language user in the UK.

I had struggled with my English pronunciation for long because I had developed an accent that many of my classmates and educators in China disapproved of. I was told that if my pronunciation had been better, I could have won first prize in an English-speaking contest. Worse still, I was even given a nickname during my bachelor's studies in China because of my mispronunciation of a particular English word. Educators and peers would loudly correct my English pronunciation and grammar whenever I tried to give a speech or read an article in class. They would criticise me for forgetting to use the past tense or for using basic vocabulary. All of this came from the perspective of an English learner: they expected clear pronunciation, no accent, flawless grammar and advanced vocabulary.

For a long time, even after moving to the UK, I was reluctant to speak or express myself due to my fear of inadequate language skills. It wasn't until I was criticised by my line manager on my probation report, "Stop murmuring! I can't understand you," that I realised I had to make a change. At that moment, I had a clear epiphany: I was speaking too quickly and murmuring, fearing that others would notice my pronunciation or grammar mistakes. This fear prevented me from finding my voice in dialogue and made it difficult to engage in meaningful conversations and resolve conflicts in work through reflective discourse (Mezirow 2012).

It was from that moment that I decided to discard this package I had been carrying,

which was the pressure to speak English perfectly. I decided to speak louder, more clearly, and more slowly to express myself. The content of what I expressed mattered most, not the way I expressed it. English, to me, became just a tool to help me communicate. This marked a clear shift in my role in using the English language in the UK. Ever since then, I've found communication easier, even though I still sometimes rely on body language and back-and-forth explanations. But at least I am now trying to express my voice.

This reflective experience highlights my own transformative learning experience of shifting my premise of seeing English as a tool for communication in the English-speaking environment, which aligns with the findings in my research.

## **7.2 Learning via reasoning and research: applying different swimming techniques**

### ***7.2.1 The transition to a different academic environment***

Participants' experiences within the theme of learning through reasoning and research highlighted the intellectual and practical learning demands of a different academic environment. These experiences emphasised academic ability, particularly the capacity for reasoning and research required in the new setting. Upon entering a British university, participants encountered an academic environment shaped by distinct values and teaching traditions, influenced by the nation's unique historical and cultural context (Ryan 2012). However, unlike the immediate shift in their language environment, this academic transition unfolded more gradually and, at times, almost imperceptibly.

#### *i. Learning in different academic environments*

##### *a) The different epistemological foundations of teaching and learning*

Generally speaking, the trends in Chinese educational philosophy emphasise hierarchy and obedience (Hu 2024), therefore, Chinese academic ideals prioritise acquiring

knowledge from teachers (Tweed and Lehman 2002; Huang and Cowden 2009; Ryan 2012). This epistemological foundation represents a preference of transmission-based approach, similar to Dewey's (1938) concept of traditional education, where learning involves acquiring and transmitting predetermined information. In the Chinese academic environment, students were more likely to construct knowledge within the ZPD through constant scaffolding from MKOs, primarily teachers rather than peers, limiting opportunities for intersubjectivity to develop shared understanding through mutual interaction and dialogue. As illustrated in Figure 7.1, teachers, viewed as all-knowing figures (Jin 1992), are seen as possessing unquestionable knowledge, which they impart to students as personal wisdom. Teachers' higher status enables them to transmit knowledge to students easily, limiting intersubjectivity and equal dialogue for knowledge co-construction. This approach echoes Dewey's (1938) critique of traditional teaching, where the progression towards knowledge is imposed by teachers as an external discipline, treated as their pre-existing minds.

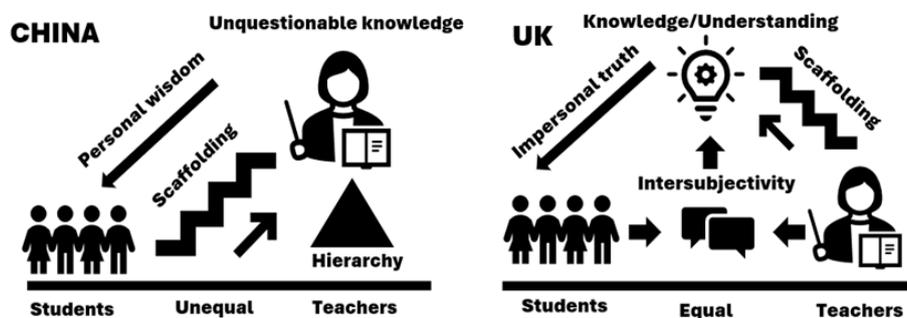


Figure 7.1 Learning process within the ZPD in educational settings (China vs. UK)

Compared to China, the academic environment in the UK is less rigid and promotes more egalitarian values, allowing students to engage with their MKOs, both teachers and peers, on a more equal footing. Its epistemological foundation prefers a more constructivist approach, emphasising knowledge construction through social interaction. In this context, the learning process within the ZPD involves progressing

towards more ‘objective’ knowledge and shared understandings through both scaffolding and intersubjectivity.

*b) Shift from accepting the knowledge to constructing knowledge*

Because participants primarily experienced learning as ‘passive knowledge absorption’ in a more transmission-based academic environment, they were less inclined to view learning as an expression and cultivation of individuality through independent activity (Dewey 1938). In other words, they had fewer reasons to interact with other MKOs, apart from teachers, to construct knowledge. Also, they were less accustomed to gathering information to support their arguments and validate academic truths. As a result, tasks like group projects, designing and conducting research often felt unfamiliar to them.

A clear example of this unfamiliarity in this research was participants’ struggle with citing and referencing literature in their research. In their previous studies, literature was typically presented as static learning material, viewed as external knowledge to be absorbed (Dewey 1938) rather than as evidence to support individual arguments. Some participants, for instance, described referencing literature as “rigid” and “somewhat silly,” feeling that it restricted their freedom to express ideas. However, they failed to recognise that citing literature was more than simply quoting sources. It involved critically analysing and synthesising existing ideas with their insights to validate their claims and construct new knowledge. This process of learning presented a personal, creative endeavour in which individuals actively shape their understanding. This example further indicated that participants struggled with transitioning from a transmission-based environment emphasising traditional education, where knowledge was simply received from teachers, to a more constructivist-based environment emphasising progressive education, where learners actively constructed knowledge through personal experience and context-based reflection (Dewey 1934; 1938).

*c) Different academic thinking skills*

Another impact of China's more transmission-based academic environment and heavily reliance on MKOs' constant scaffolding is the limited space for critical reflection, which discourages learners from critically analysing the knowledge provided by MKOs and engaging in reflective dialogue with each other. In such academic environment, where teachers are seen as authorities and knowledge-givers, students are not expected to contribute new insights to the field until they have fully mastered it (Jin and Cortazzi 2006). In such settings, teachers focus on filling students with unquestionable knowledge, leaving little space for learners to reflect on their experiences critically. Over time, this approach may diminish students' drive for critical reflection, leading to underdeveloped critical and analytical thinking skills. Based on the findings of this research, Chinese international students might lack critical thinking skills. A few interview participants admitted that they had either never heard of critical thinking or did not fully understand it. For example, Participant N found critical thinking challenging, as she believed that all published papers were inherently reasonable and valid, based on her previous learning experiences in China.

However, critical reflection is essential in learning because it connects current observations with past experiences to integrate new ones (Dewey 1934; 1938; Mezirow 1991; 2012). Compared to China, the British constructivist-based academic environment places greater emphasis on the thinking process (Ryan 2012), which involves reflection and judgement to develop a more thoughtful, well-organised plan of action (Dewey 1938). In such educational settings, students are encouraged to engage critically with controversial topics, fostering academic progress and contributing to the construction of new knowledge (Ryan 2010). The findings of this research showed that most participants perceived that their British peers demonstrated greater creativity and innovation compared to their Chinese counterparts.

In addition, the findings of this research also suggested that the lack of critical thinking in Chinese international students might not be recognised by their local educators. For instance, Participant C had already explicitly included her thinking process in her writing, but her tutor still advised her to do so to enhance critical depth. However, the tutor did not realise that her thinking process itself lacked critical analysis, which left her feeling confused.

*ii. Reasoning through the different meaning perspective*

Based on Mezirow (1991; 2012), learning is a process of interpreting experiences through meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. These meaning perspectives reflect a combination of an individual's psychological makeup and cultural environment. When transitioning to a new academic environment, where HEI's academic expectations and outcomes are reached via interpreting experiences through the local meaning perspectives, students from different academic and cultural backgrounds may find it challenging. In this research, participants' prolonged struggle with understanding English academic materials and writing highlighted their difficulty in interpreting experiences through their existing meaning perspectives. Because their meaning perspectives were shaped by China's academic and socio-cultural environment, influencing their subjective understanding and experiences, while those of some authors and educators were formed within Western academic settings.

*a) Struggle with understanding reasoning in English literature*

My findings showed that reading and academic referencing remained the most challenging tasks throughout the year of study in the UK, with limited progress in comprehending English materials. Some participants explained that their difficulties extended beyond language, as they struggled to understand content even when translated into Chinese. This could be explained by Mezirow's (1991) meaning perspective, as participants' difficulties extended beyond language to differences in

reasoning and argumentation. Even when translated into Chinese, the texts remained challenging, as participants interpreted them through meaning perspectives shaped by their experiences in China, which often differed from those of the authors.

For example, Participant H from the School of Social Sciences noted, “If an English journal article had even one Chinese author, it would be much easier to understand than an article written entirely by foreign authors.” This insight addresses the challenge of understanding non-Chinese authors’ points of view, which, according to Mezirow (2000), is the expression of their habits of mind. It is a part of their frame of reference, as their meaning perspectives, to shape how they perceive and interpret the world (Mezirow 1991; Fleming 2018). In other words, academic texts are not just expressions of knowledge but also demonstrations of the authors’ reasoning process by interpreting experiences based on their meaning perspectives. For Chinese international students, understanding the reasoning based on these meaning perspectives is difficult because the authors’ meaning perspectives differed from their own.

This also helps explain why challenges were particularly pronounced in the social sciences, where interpretation is closely tied to the author’s cultural and academic context. This aligns with the quantitative data, which showed a statistically significant difference in learning experience depending on the subject participants studied. For example, Participant H struggled to understand why a medical case study was linked to social sciences and had difficulty distinguishing whether an argument in an article reflected a left-wing or right-wing perspective. These were challenges her British classmates did not face. This further suggests that students who shared similar meaning perspectives with the authors could more easily grasp their reasoning, while those from different backgrounds faced greater challenges. For Participant H, her experiences in China led her to view medical case studies strictly within a clinical context, rather than linking them to social sciences. Moreover, due to China’s one-party system, the concepts of left-wing or right-wing politics were irrelevant, making it difficult for her

to interpret texts referencing these ideologies.

Quantitative data showed that participants with prior UK study experience found understanding academic materials less demanding, while those without found it most challenging. Although the t-test showed no significant relationship with overall learning experience, the pattern still suggests it could be a factor affecting their experience of understanding English academic content. Participants with previous study experience in UK universities had more opportunities to develop new meaning perspectives within a Western academic cultural context. These meaning perspectives, in turn, became a new frame of reference, helping them better understand how non-Chinese authors interpreted and evaluated the meaning of experiences (Mezirow 1991).

*b) Challenges in expressing reasoning in academic writing*

On the other hand, in terms of academic writing, this challenge was presented in a different form. The participants found it difficult to apply academic reasoning skills in their English writing. Initially, their struggle was primarily with how to express their ideas in English, which was more related to language application. However, after nine months, their difficulties evolved from merely writing in English to thinking in English and expressing those thoughts in writing. For example, they began to focus on revealing the underlying logic in social phenomena and applying relevant theories to support their claims.

This shift also showed that the participants gradually recognised the importance of reasoning through their critical reflections on continuous interactions in their learning experiences in the new academic environment (Mezirow 2012; Dewey 1938). Some participants attributed their struggles in academic writing to the differences in logical thinking between the UK and China. This further supports the claim that reasoning, as a process of thinking in a logical and structured way, is based on the different meaning perspectives. For instance, Participant B explained that writing in Chinese was easy

because everyone shared the same “logic,” but writing in English was challenging due to difficulty in uncovering the underlying reasoning. In Chinese, readers with a similar sociocultural and academic background easily understood her reasoning. However, writing in English required her to adopt a different meaning perspective, making it harder to express her reasoning effectively.

On the other hand, non-Chinese educators reviewing Chinese international students’ writing also faced challenges, as some research reports that these students tend to be less direct in articulating arguments (Jin 1992; Heng 2019). One participant noted that while their logical relationships were clear in Chinese, their tutor felt the English writing “made no sense.” This difficulty stemmed from differing meaning perspectives shaped by distinct sociocultural and academic environments, making it hard for tutors to understand the students’ writing. Adult learning involves validating beliefs by examining the underlying reasoning, which happens within the context of their meaning perspective (Mezirow 1991; Fleming 2018). When Chinese international students write academic essays in English, they interpret their experiences and validate their points of view based on their ‘made in China’ meaning perspective. As a result, their writing may appear unclear to British readers, who interpret the text from their own ‘made in UK’ meaning perspective and lack the framework to understand and validate the students’ ‘made in China’ points of view.

The above findings add to existing research by highlighting additional factors, beyond limited linguistic resources and writing experience and skills (Li et al. 2010; Tian and Lowe 2009), that contribute to Chinese international students’ struggles with English academic writing.

### ***7.2.2 The disorienting dilemma and the incremental transformation***

#### *i. The disorienting dilemma in a different academic environment*

The transition between different academic environments could create a series of

dilemmas that affected participants conducting both intellectual and practical learning tasks within a UK university context. The root of these dilemmas lay in participants' unfamiliarity with UK academic expectations (Gu and Maley 2008), as their previous learning experiences in China had not adequately prepared them for the new academic culture.

One challenge was the differing meaning perspectives shaped by distinct socio-cultural backgrounds, making it difficult for participants to understand reasoning in English academic literature or express their own in writing. Their ongoing struggle with reading and writing represented a disorienting dilemma, marking the first phase of transformative learning. For example, Participant F initially attributed her unclear essay expressions to language issues. She explained that her difficulty stemmed from Chinese writing conventions, which emphasise "describing reality in beautiful language." This revealed that her initial writing process in a UK university was still shaped by the previous meaning perspectives. The challenges in reasoning through different meaning perspectives highlighted the need for transformative learning, where gradually changing and reshaping previously held premises allowed participants to become more flexible and reflective, enabling them to interpret meaning in a new academic environment (Mezirow 1990; 1996; 2012).

On the other hand, due to the differences in epistemological positions across educational settings, participants were unfamiliar with critical reflection and research practices required in UK universities. This made it difficult to meet critical thinking expectations and the analytical depth needed for academic tasks. For example, Participant N struggled with the design project requirements, initially attributing it to differing policies and the concept of "urban commons." However, the real challenge was expanding her thinking beyond conventional norms to consider the needs of diverse stakeholders and design spaces that met the public requirements of different individuals. This revealed a gap in her critical thinking abilities, as her previous educational

experiences did not foster context-based critical reflection to adapt to a changing environment (Dewey 1934; 1938). Additionally, a lack of hands-on research experience led to struggles with tasks such as conducting literature reviews, designing sampling strategies, and analysing data. These difficulties highlighted how their previous education failed to prepare them for constructing knowledge in the constructivist academic environment, potentially leading to miseducative experiences, as discussed in the next section.

*ii. Incremental transformation*

Unlike switching to a different language for learning, the impact of an unfamiliar academic culture was gradual, and the struggle to meet academic expectations unfolded incrementally. Therefore, in this case, this gradual process enabled incremental transformation, where a series of smaller adjustments accumulated, eventually leading to a meaningful shift in one's meaning perspective (Mezirow 2012).

After experiencing disorienting dilemmas due to unfamiliarity with UK academic culture, most participants went through the initial phases of transformative learning. Many expressed frustrations over their struggles with reading, referencing, and poor marks. These challenges sparked a gradual transformation, leading some participants to reflect critically on the cultural differences between China and the UK. They recognised that in China, they were not taught how to think deeply or analyse the logic behind phenomena in English academic writing. Some participants realised that these difficulties were shared by their peers, as noted by Participant H, who mentioned that neither she nor her peers could fully understand the cases in the academic articles.

These experiences align with the first four phases of transformative learning. However, similar to the experiences related to English language application, the key to achieving mindful transformative learning experiences resulted from the fifth phase, which involves the exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions (Mezirow 2000).

### ***7.2.3 The change of role: from knowledge receiver to knowledge explorer and creator***

The participants' varied experiences in completing intellectual and practical learning tasks, whether consciously or unconsciously, highlighted the significance of their evolving roles in the learning process during transformative learning. In their previous academic environment, the role of learners was relatively passive, with knowledge mainly transmitted by MKOs. However, in the UK academic environment, where critical thinking and analysis are emphasised, participants were expected to actively engage with knowledge construction through conducting research and substantiating their arguments through reflection and analysis. For the participants, this represented a shift from receiving fixed knowledge to constructing and critically engaging with it. Therefore, it marked a shift from the role of a passive knowledge receiver to that of a knowledge explorer (through reasoning) and a knowledge creator (through research).

#### *i. Developing new academic thinking skills to engage in the new role*

Some participants endeavoured to adopt the new role of explorer and creator, striving to cultivate the necessary analytical and critical thinking skills for executing their plans in learning, whether deliberately or inadvertently. Through this skill development process, they began to embody their new roles, which reflected and facilitated the subsequent stages of transformative learning as articulated by Mezirow (2000).

Take Participant B and Participant F as examples. Both improved their assignment scores after nine months in the UK, recognising that the key was the logic behind, which referred to the underlying reasoning shaped by their meaning perspectives and habits of mind. By “grasping the logic,” they were effectively reflecting on and analysing their points of view in writing, using them to support their claims. Participant F described this experience as using “logic” to solve problems, while Participant B referred to it as “explaining the underlying logic.” In this process, by articulating their points of view, they developed reasoning skills, as Participant F explicitly acknowledged.

This process reflected an exploration of new roles for both participants, as they actively engaged in the learning process to construct knowledge through their own reasoning, rather than passively receiving it. It represented a critical reflection process, where they reflected on their challenges in academic writing and became aware of the underlying premises supporting their claims in writing, in this case, the logic behind their points of view (Mezirow 2012). It also marked their willingness to transform their former meaning perspectives to generate more justified interpretations in the new academic environment (Mezirow, 1990; 1996; 2012).

*ii. Failing to explore new roles*

On the other hand, some participants struggled to advance through the transformative learning process and became stuck at the stage where they needed to explore new roles and actions. While they recognised the disorienting dilemma of understanding and writing academic essays, they found it challenging to move beyond this stage due to a lack of further interaction between their feelings and thoughts with the environment (Dewey 1934), particularly, a deep exploration of a new role in this new setting (Mezirow 2000). For instance, some participants attributed their writing difficulties to a lack of content, rather than questioning why certain elements were necessary or how they contributed to the overall knowledge construction.

A clear example is Participant C, who struggled to understand the purpose of a literature review. Instead of questioning its role in her research and engaging with the academic expectations of the new environment, she repeatedly asked her educator what a literature review should “look like.” She failed to pause and reflect on the challenge, instead relying on the educator to impose knowledge on her (Dewey 1938). In these cases, the participants remained in the role of passive knowledge receivers, expecting their educators to fill their knowledge gaps rather than taking the initiative to explore and create knowledge themselves. This reluctance to embrace new roles hindered their

transformative learning.

#### ***7.2.4 The transformative and (mis)educative experience***

##### *i. The transformative learning experiences*

Participants who began to explore new roles and engage in them progressed to later phases of transformative learning, acquiring new knowledge and skills. For example, Participant F, upon realising that using “more native-like” English expressions didn’t necessarily lead to better marks, began to critically reflect on her experiences. Based on these reflections, she consciously adjusted her approach and actively took steps to turn her intentions into reality (Mezirow 2000). This shift involved moving away from complex vocabulary or authentic expressions, focusing instead on uncovering the logic behind her ideas. This change not only challenged her previous premise but also helped her develop reasoning skills by transforming her writing process.

Eventually, Participant F reflected that the entire programme had taught her how to solve real-life problems, with the key being an understanding of the underlying logic. This could be seen as a transformation in her habits of mind, expanding her frame of reference by shifting her premise. In her previous academic culture, the emphasis had been on language expression to describe knowledge (or “reality” in her words), rather than critically and analytically exploring the reasoning behind it. However, after transitioning to the new academic environment in the UK and undergoing a transformative learning process, her premise shifted to engaging more deeply with knowledge by discovering the reasoning behind it, then using that to solve real-life problems. This supports Mezirow’s explanation of mindful transformative learning, where the learner thoughtfully acts on reflective insights, reshaping their frame of reference to solve problems (Mezirow 1990; 1996; 2012).

ii. *An aesthetic experience of transforming intellectual approach*

Additionally, Participant F's transformative learning experience was also educative, characterised by an aesthetic quality that made her entire studying experience in the UK intellectually fulfilling (Dewey 1934). Initially, her impulse to express herself in academic writing to UK educators was met with resistance, as her writing was perceived as unclear. This challenge prompted her to pause and reflect. According to Dewey (1938), she controlled her impulse by combining her current observation that "native-like" English expressions did not guarantee higher marks with her past experience of writing in Chinese. This process allowed for critical reflection on her thinking within the context of the new academic culture in the UK. Rather than reacting impulsively, she created a plan to express herself by uncovering the reasoning behind her claims.

The aesthetic quality of this experience drove the entire process towards fulfilment (Dewey 1934), marking a more engaged interaction with her internal premise and external academic environment. It was not just about achieving clarity in writing but about transforming her intellectual approach. By embracing this process, Participant F became more engaged with her surroundings, not only within the British academic environment, where she achieved higher marks, but also in practical contexts such as solving real-world problems by analysing underlying reasoning during her internship in the UK.

This transformative learning experience was educative, fostering further learning and meaningful engagement with her environment, both academically and within the industry. At the same time, it was also an aesthetic experience, as it allowed Participant F to engage with her reasoning process to explore knowledge, ensuring a sense of fulfilment in these intellectual activities (Dewey 1934). This completeness could be seen in Participant F's revelation that the most significant takeaway from her

postgraduate programme was learning to understand the logic in real-life industries. This was the most fulfilling and enjoyable part of her cross-cultural transition, where she felt most engaged and accomplished (English and Doddington 2019).

*iii. The miseducative experiences*

On the other hand, for some participants, failing to explore new roles and actions while remaining passive knowledge receivers also led to miseducative experiences. This was particularly evident in the cases of two participants who failed their programmes. Both struggled with academic reasoning and conducting research but took no further action to address their difficulties or adapt their learning approach. Instead, they continued to rely on their previously ingrained habits of mind to interpret their experiences.

Participant G overlooked the importance of academic rigour, as writing in China had not emphasised it to the same extent as what she experienced in the UK. Similarly, Participant N struggled with citing literature to support her claims in the research project and failed to demonstrate analytical reasoning in her writing. She admitted that her background in architectural design at a Chinese university led her to believe that simply explaining her design concepts was sufficient, which was a premise she carried into her entire studies in the UK.

By remaining passive knowledge receivers in their new academic environment, these participants resisted further engagement with the new surroundings, where active learning through social interaction and critical thinking were emphasised. These experiences limited their interaction with the environment and hindered critical reflection on knowledge acquisition, limiting their growth and leading to negative educational outcomes. In this sense, their experiences were miseducative (Dewey 1934).

### **7.2.5 Personal reflection**

#### *i. The allegorical reflection: applying different swimming techniques*

Swimming in a pool requires specific techniques to move forward and avoid stagnation. But when entering a different pool, do the same techniques still apply?

In my understanding, the reasoning and research skills required in UK universities function like swimming techniques: just as different techniques suit different pools, these skills equip students to navigate diverse academic contexts. However, it is only after diving in that one realises previously learned techniques may no longer suffice. Likewise, participants gradually recognised the need for different skills and approaches to meet academic expectations in the UK, rather than immediately.

Learning is inherently shaped by engagement with one's surroundings. British and Chinese academic cultures provide students with distinct intellectual tools to develop advanced thinking skills (Vygotsky 1978). Also, through interactions with MKOs and their sociocultural environment, participants had developed thinking and learning skills shaped by their experiences in China. Upon arriving in the UK, they needed to adapt and develop new skills, as those from their original environment were not always sufficient for academic success in the UK, much like adjusting one's swimming technique to navigate a different pool.

#### *ii. My personal experience of realising the different meaning perspectives*

Different meaning perspectives between Chinese international students and local British, as the background of the reasoning process, are often hard to recognise. Even after years of living in the UK, I still frequently blame my challenges in reading and writing in English to differences in language expression.

It wasn't until I had a conversation with my British-born Chinese children, aged six and

three, that I realised the presence of these meaning perspectives. We were discussing Sun Wukong, known as Monkey King, who is a central character in the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*<sup>2</sup>. I described him as a yaoguai<sup>3</sup> with many powers.

My children immediately responded, “He’s a superhero, right, mummy?”

I said, “No, no, he’s more like a monster.”

They then asked, “How could he be a monkey then?”

I explained that a monkey could be a yaoguai, but he was a good one.

They tried to relate the concept to something familiar, like Sirius Black<sup>4</sup> from *Harry Potter* or Rocket Raccoon<sup>5</sup> from a superhero movie.

I struggled to explain that, even though Sun Wukong was a monkey, he wasn’t human and still had a monkey’s face, despite wearing human clothes (see Figure 7.2).

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<sup>2</sup> *Journey to the West* is a Chinese novel about a monk’s pilgrimage to India with his disciples, including the legendary Monkey King, Wukong, to retrieve sacred scriptures.

<sup>3</sup> Yaoguai are a category of beings in Chinese mythology, folklore, and literature, distinguished by their extraordinary or otherworldly abilities and their peculiar, uncanny, or unsettling qualities (Yu 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Sirius Black, a key character in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, can transform into a large black dog.

<sup>5</sup> Rocket Raccoon is a genetically enhanced raccoon and skilled marksman who serves as a key member of the Guardians of the Galaxy in the Marvel Comics and Cinematic Universe.



Figure 7.2 The cinematic image of Sun Wukong (Xinhua 2016)

It was confusing for me because, when I was their age, I easily understood that Sun Wukong was a yaoguai, like other yaoguai in *Journey to the West*. However, my children, with their meaning perspectives based on the modern and Western sociocultural environment, superhero movies and fairy tales, couldn't grasp this. The concept of yaoguai was deeply rooted in ancient Chinese literature, something familiar to most Chinese children but foreign to them. This conversion, however, indirectly reflected the research participants' experiences of struggling to understand points of view from Western authors and convey their own views through different meaning perspectives.

I also noticed that the more I tried to position myself as the MKO for my children, the more difficult it became for them to understand. When I stuck to my own habits of mind, explaining in my own way, they became more confused, which was frustrating for both of the parties. However, when I shifted my role and approached them as a learner by showing them pictures of Sun Wukong, describing what he did, and letting them interpret it, they quickly engaged with the character. They concluded that Sun Wukong

was a superhero, a monkey man who protected his brothers and master, not a scary monster. This interpretation resonated deeply with them, and with me as well. Rather than relying on scaffolding, I engaged in a dialogue that allowed us to come together to ‘name the Sun Wukong’ through discussion about the socio-cultural concept (Freire 1970).

This conversation was a transformative learning experience. It presented a disorienting dilemma of explaining a cultural character to children from a different culture. I critically reflected on why they could not interpret it as I did as a child, which shifted my habitual thinking and led me to adopt a new role as a learner rather than an all-knowing figure to my children. This shift deepened my engagement in dialogue with them, allowing the discourse to find common ground and embrace different perspectives, ultimately helping me fully understand the varied meanings behind them (Mezirow 2000; 2012).

### **7.3 Learning engagement: adapting different swimming styles**

#### ***7.3.1 The transition to a different learning environment***

When discussing participants’ experiences under the theme of learning engagement, the focus is on their learning approach, particularly how they engaged with their learning activities in the UK. The previously discussed academic environment reflected the specific expectations for academic learning within UK universities. This section expands to encompass the learning approaches in the new learning environment, highlighting the shift from a more teacher-centred learning environment to one that fostered independent, self-motivated learning.

##### *i. Different engagement approaches*

###### *a) Scaffolding within ZPD*

As discussed, in many cases, China’s hierarchical educational system positions teachers

as authoritative figures within students' ZPD, fostering a knowledge transmission model. Learning is facilitated through direct instruction provided by their teachers, with teachers structuring knowledge into objective facts organised through manageable steps, leaving little room for intersubjectivity or critical reflection. Consequently, Chinese international students may lack experience in reflective thinking and independent interpretation (Turner 2006). Over time, this teacher-led learning approach might become their second nature, reinforcing reliance on external guidance rather than self-directed exploration or critical questioning.

However, when participants began studying at a UK university, which emphasised self-motivated learning and more engagement with social interaction, they found it challenging and attributed it to their previous learning experiences in China. For instance, Participant I felt that learning in the UK lacked a clear goal, unlike in China. This could also explain why some participants struggled to understand assignment requirements, particularly in design-related programs where academic expectations differed significantly. As Participant M noted, in China, she received specific instructions to complete design tasks, whereas in the UK, educators provided only a general direction, requiring students to identify their own questions.

#### *b) Instructions from MKOs*

As discussed in Chapter 2.2.1, one essential aspect of learning is engaging in dialogue with MKOs. Children can acquire information and skills through such interactions while developing higher-order mental functions (Vygotsky 1978). Also, adult learners can uncover deeper realities (Freire 1970) and reassess their assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives (Mezirow 1991). However, in the context of a more teacher-centred and transmission-based educational environment in China, where educational philosophy has long been characterised by hierarchy and obedience (Hu 2004), educators are often regarded primarily as instructors. This emphasis on obedience prioritises listening and

paying attention over interactive dialogue. As a result, dialogue with MKOs in this setting may be interpreted as a process of passively receiving instructions rather than actively and critically reflecting on these interactions.

Therefore, participants were often less familiar with independent learning due to their prior educational experiences in China. In the UK, they reflected on these experiences and sought clear, detailed instructions through dialogue with MKOs, particularly educators. When facing learning difficulties, they favoured explicit feedback as a form of ‘one-way dialogue’ to acquire pre-contained knowledge from educators (Dewey 1938). For example, several participants often asked their educators whether their assessments or ideas were correct and what their next steps should be.

In addition, this ‘one-way dialogue’ limited participants’ critical reflection. As a result, some architecture participants felt confused by conflicting feedback from different tutors, indicating limited critically reflection on the feedback received. Without active engagement in dialogue, participants struggled to reflect deeply, making it difficult for them to adapt, revise, and construct new knowledge and habits (Dewey 1938; Freire 1970).

*ii. Different learning skills*

*a) Skills developed by the original learning environment*

Limited critical reflection resulting from the ‘one-way dialogue’ with MKOs hinders the development of critical, analytical, reflective, and independent learning skills. Consequently, participants tended to adopt a more dependent, group-oriented approach, seeking pre-contained knowledge from knowledgeable peers as surrogate teachers, a characteristic of traditional education described by Dewey (1938). For instance, Participant L valued advice from a “teacher-like” group member, while Participant M depended on peers with skills she lacked.

On the other hand, findings of this research also revealed that some participants desired interactive learning via interaction, with some preferring offline learning for greater engagement. This suggested that their reliance on a dependent learning approach was not always a deliberate choice but rather a result of lacking independent and reflective learning skills.

*b) Developing new skills*

As participants immersed themselves in the UK learning environment, dialogues with local peers and educators prompted them to challenge and revise their perspectives (Mezirow 1991). British peers introduced fresh ideas, while educators encouraged them to develop their own understanding. With limited instructional guidance from educators and greater emphasis on students' input, their learning approaches gradually developed, both consciously and unconsciously. After nine months of study in the UK, they increasingly favoured independent work, and their understanding of academic requirements improved. These findings suggested that as participants adapted, engaged in dialogue to seek common understanding, and evaluated interpretations (Mezirow 1991), they developed essential skills for critical reflection, such as independent learning, leading to a shift in their learning engagement.

**7.3.2 The disorienting dilemma and incremental transformation**

*i. The disorienting dilemma in a different learning environment*

Participants' struggle with self-motivated and independent learning in UK universities could be considered as an obstacle during their learning, therefore, they tried to draw on past experiences to overcome difficulties (Dewey 1943). In this case, when they struggled to understand assignment requirements, some participants sought instructional guidance from their supervisors, as they did in China. However, they were often dissatisfied with the "not straightforward" feedback provided. This series of

experiences led to a disorienting dilemma, which served as the catalyst for transformative learning.

Take Participant M, for example. She faced a series of resistance in learning due to stark differences in design project requirements between universities in China and the UK. Attempting to draw on her past experiences, she realised they were not applicable to the new context. This created a disorienting dilemma, prompting her to pause and reflect, which ultimately fostered transformative learning and an educative experience (Dewey 1943; Mezirow 2000), as discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.3.4.

*ii. Incremental transformation*

Participants' challenges in adapting to the new learning environment often triggered incremental transformation, as they gradually realised the differences in learning engagement compared to China, usually following unsatisfactory marks, confusion over assignment requirements, or "unproductive" tutorial and lecture formats. Rather than engaging in self-examination with guilt or shame, as Mezirow (2000) suggested, many experienced dissatisfaction, prompting them to critically assess the differences in their prior learning experiences. For instance, Participant C initially noted about lectures lacking useful information but later realised this contrasted sharply with her previous "rote" learning in China. Similarly, Participants M and N expected detailed instructions and feedback from tutors but found that UK tutorials provided only broad guidance. They also noticed that different tutors offered varying feedback on the same design, a challenge shared by their peers.

The above findings demonstrated that most participants went through the first four phases of transformative learning and started to realise the different roles of educators in the UK. Most participants realised, through critical reflection on their past experiences (Dewey 1934), that the learning approach in the UK differed from their

previous studies in China. For instance, the two students who initially failed, Participant G and Participant N, both came to realise that educators in the UK required them to develop their own independent thoughts. Participant G recognised that the primary focus of educators in UK universities was to encourage students to “think independently” and “figure things out on their own.” Similarly, Participant N observed that the assessment requirements in the UK were different from those in China, prompting her to consider issues she had not encountered in her previous educational experiences.

### ***7.3.3 The change of role: from recipient of instructions to self-motivated learner***

As explained, educators in UK universities function as facilitators rather than sole providers of knowledge. Correspondingly, when participants started to study in the UK, they were no longer ‘recipients’ of their educators’ instructions, following whatever was requested without critical reflection. Instead, they were self-motivated ‘learners.’ The difference lies in the role: as a ‘recipient,’ the focus is on receiving ‘instruction’ through a transmission-based approach, where fixed information is delivered by educators, as Dewey (1938) described in traditional education. In contrast, as a ‘learner,’ the focus shifts to knowledge through a constructivist model, which varies depending on the learner’s individual process of knowledge construction and interpretation. This also represents learning through experiences shaped by each individual’s context in progressive education.

#### *i. Becoming a self-motivated learner*

For participants of this research, those who successfully made the shift in their role and sought out corresponding actions were able to progress further in their transformative learning because they started to question what they had previously taken for granted and decided to act on their reflective insights (Mezirow 2012).

For example, after nine months of study in the UK, while most participants realised

their learning process was no longer just about following instructions, only those who made subsequent changes saw improved marks in assessments compared to the previous term. These experiences reflected their actions based on critical reflection, as they took steps towards proactive engagement in academic activities, demonstrating further progression in transformative learning (Mezirow 2000). For instance, Participant M began exploring alternative channels for accessing useful information, rather than relying solely on her educators, while Participant F actively engaged in her industry internship, applying her knowledge in practice.

These experiences also marked participants' attempts to engage more with their environment, as they sought to connect their internal intent to gain knowledge with external resources, such as accessing multiple channels or applying their learning in practice. These actions also led to an educative experience, as per Dewey (1938), where personal growth happens through active reflection and engagement with one's environment.

*ii. Failed to explore new role*

On the other hand, some participants did not progress to the later phases of transformative learning and remained stuck in the middle stage of exploring their new roles. These participants shared a common experience: although they recognised the difference in educators' roles compared to China, they did not actively act on this reorganisation. This reflects Mezirow's (2012) explanation that transformative learning occurs only when learners act on their reflective insights; those who fail to act, fail to transform.

Participant N, for instance, recognised that UK educators were not the 'knowledge providers' she was used to in China, however, she still blamed them for not providing clearer instructions before assessments. She believed her educator misled her into thinking she could pass, rather than warning her of potential failure. In this case, rather

than transforming her approach and taking action to apply her reflections, she remained anchored in her previous mindset, preventing true transformation (Mezirow 2012).

#### ***7.3.4 The transformative and (mis)educative learning experiences***

##### *i. The transformation learning experiences*

As some participants further engaged with their new role as self-motivated learners and took corresponding actions, they progressed through the next phases of transformative learning. For example, Participant M, through exploring and experimenting with this new role, acknowledged that she was compelled to develop independent thinking. What she did not initially recognise was that this process also helped her cultivate critical thinking skills, allowing her to use her own judgment to solve problems. She also likely enhanced her logical thinking skills, as she no longer needed additional support to complete design work. As she acquired new skills, Participant M solidified her competence in her new role as a self-motivated learner (Mezirow 2000). Similarly, Participant F realised that learning could extend to practical applications. She actively engaged in an internship, where she developed new analytical skills that enabled her to better grasp the reasoning behind literature.

Over time, these participants gained confidence and developed new habits of mind, involving shifts in both process and premise. Participant M began to place less emphasis on tutors' feedback, instead relying more on her own judgment. This shift reshaped her premise, changing her perception of educators from unquestionable authorities to individuals whose opinions she "paid less attention to," as she put it. Concurrently, her process shifted towards a more self-motivated and independent learning approach. For Participant F, her transformation culminated in the ability to turn intentions into reality (Mezirow 2012). She described this as "grasping the hook," or applying theoretical knowledge to solve real-life problems. This transformation marked a shift in premise, as she realised that learning extended beyond theoretical knowledge to include practical

application. It also reflected a shift in process, where she began applying her learning in real-world contexts.

On the other hand, participants who failed to actively adapt and continued to rely on the taken-for-granted habits of mind from their previous learning environment, where they played the role of passive recipients of instruction, risked losing their willingness to engage. For example, while Participant M began exploring new channels for accessing information, Participant H lost interest in using university-provided resources, reflecting her reluctance to engage more actively in the new learning environment. This ultimately contributed to a miseducative experience, as discussed later.

*ii. The educative experiences and miseducative experiences*

For Participant M, her transformation in both premise and process enhanced her ability to engage meaningfully with the new learning environment. This transformation also demonstrated a sense of continuity and interaction within the educative experience (Dewey 1934). On one hand, her critical reflection on past experiences empowered her to progress. On the other hand, her active engagement with the learning environment allowed her to develop new skills, enabling more effective engagement.

Participant M's metaphor comparing learning approaches in China and the UK reflected a thoughtful process of critically reflecting on her past learning experiences, reviewing them to generate new interpretations of her current experiences (Mezirow 2012). Participant M described the teacher-student relationship in China as a "client and service provider" dynamic, where students fulfilled set requirements. In contrast, the UK system, with its lack of clear instructions, required her to navigate learning as "conducting research," giving her the freedom and responsibility to define issues and actively construct knowledge.

On the other hand, Participant M chose to act on these critical reflections, which helped

her gradually explore new actions for her role as a self-motivated learner for a true transformation (Mezirow 2012). After nine months of study, she began to interact more with the learning environment by seeking alternative channels for accessing useful information and trusting her own judgment when proceeding with her work. All of these experiences reflected increased interaction with her learning environment. Those experiences demonstrated personal growth by developing plasticity and dependency (Dewey 1916), enhancing her ability to acquire new learning skills, adapt to a more self-motivated and independent approach, and engage more deeply with the learning environment through active change.

Other participants, particularly Participant N, who was in the same program as Participant M, struggled to progress in transformative learning. They remained focused on receiving instructions from educators, clinging to their original approach from past experience. Their experience became miseducative, as they failed to adapt to the new environment and continued to rely on old habits, hindering their growth and development (Dewey 1934).

### ***7.3.5 Personal reflection***

#### *i. The allegorical reflection: applying different swimming styles*

When I tried to interpret participants' experiences of learning engagement through the analogy of swimming in a different pool, it immediately struck me that their learning approach was similar to swimming styles. Different styles, such as backstroke, freestyle, or butterfly, can help swimmers move forward efficiently in the pool. These styles are neither inherently better nor worse; each has its own advantages and challenges. The suitability or encouragement of a particular style depends on the pool or context. For instance, some pools are better suited for certain strokes due to their size, depth, or design, which encourages swimmers to adapt their techniques accordingly. Similarly, different learning environments shape the extent of learners' engagement, just as a pool

influences the choice of swimming style.

Therefore, the ways learners interact with their academic environment can be likened to different swimming styles. These are not challenges to overcome but preferences shaped by their surroundings; just as they should not be seen as individual deficits, but reflections of institutional and structural constraints (Mittelmeier et al. 2024). As learners immerse themselves in their learning environment, their engagement approach evolves in response to the surroundings. In this way, educational environments in China and the UK foster different learning engagement preferences or learning styles among students.

Just as different learning environments influence learners' skill development, the absence of certain thinking and learning skills can limit students' choice of learning approach. Reflecting on my experience observing my daughter's swimming lessons, when she started at five, backstroke was her favourite style. By age six, after mastering the breathing technique, she switched to freestyle, finding it faster. The key difference was that backstroke required less technique for managing breathing underwater, while freestyle became easier once she developed the necessary skills. This mirrored participants' experiences of developing new learning and thinking skills during their time at a UK university. As they gradually developed the required skills, they became more capable of adapting to different learning engagement approaches, just as my daughter adapted her swimming style as her techniques improved.

*ii. My personal experiences of role transformation in learning engagement*

My father, a retired senior college lecturer in China, communicated with me as an 'instructor,' though he likely never realised it. which felt like external knowledge being imposed on my mind (Dewey 1938). While I might not have agreed, I passively accepted his approach, as the engagement dynamic defined my role as a 'humble recipient.' When I grew up and started helping my daughter with her phonics learning,

this pattern of engagement seemed to repeat. Unconsciously, I considered myself the ‘instructor’ or ‘knowledge provider,’ and she was the ‘recipient,’ unknowingly ‘pouring’ my knowledge onto her. She hated it. She started tearing up when it was time to do her reading homework because, as she explained, she was so afraid of making mistakes.

However, when I consulted with her primary school teacher about her reading performance, they told me she was very happy and engaged when reading at school. She enjoyed expressing her ideas, and when a new word appeared that she didn’t know, she would say, “Oh, I never thought of that”, which was a far cry from how she was at home. Her teacher advised me to create a more enjoyable environment for her reading at home, to stop seeing myself as a teacher to teach her to read, and instead approach it as a learner, reading together with her.

That was truly an epiphany: I realised I had been carrying over my original habits of mind, shaped by my own learning experiences with my father, into my relationship with my daughter. However, times had changed, and our sociocultural environments were different. Through this critical reflection, I recognised it was time to adopt a new role that would change the way I engaged with her learning. Embracing the role of a learner allowed for more interactive dialogue, where she could gain knowledge through collaborative interactions with MKOs (Vygotsky 1978) and express her own voice through discussion (Mezirow 2012).

Interestingly, when I look back at my communication with my father these days, it has also changed. He has unconsciously transformed his role as well. As I became a PhD student, and thus, no longer less educated than him and gaining more knowledge in areas he was unfamiliar with, he began to step down from the ‘instructor’ role. He is now more willing to engage in conversations with me, allowing my input, listening to what I have to say, and offering his own interpretations in return. Now, our dialogue has evolved into a genuine reflective discourse, as described by Freire (1970) and

Mezirow (2012), where both parties have the opportunity to express themselves, creating space for mutual reflection and interpretation of each other's perspectives. It's a transformative learning process that he's not fully aware of!

#### **7.4 Interpersonal dynamics: adjusting to the different quality of the water**

##### ***7.4.1 The transition to a different social environment***

###### *i. Learning via social interaction in a collective environment*

From a social constructivist perspective, learning is shaped by close engagement with one's social environment (Dewey 1934), an external factor that supports development (Vygotsky 1978). In a collective society like China, where communal connections are deeply valued, individuals prioritise pluralistic harmony in both personal and academic life (Shu 2016; Chen 2017; Ryan 2012). Over time, this ingrained habit of mind reinforces a focus on harmony and conflict avoidance, even in academic settings (Ryan 2012). On the other hand, both social and academic environments in the UK emphasise individual thinking, self-expression, assertiveness, argumentation, and critique (Ryan 2012; Jin 1992).

###### *a) Collective goals in social interactions*

The emphasis on pluralistic harmony fosters a shared premise: aligning with collective values and norms (Shu 2016; Chen 2017). When participants transitioned to study in a more individual social environment, many still retained the premise of prioritising group success, often at the expense of their own preferences. Some participants showed a strong tendency to achieve a unified outcome during group assignments by compromising their views, personal pace, and even desires. For instance, Participant A and Participant I preferred a cohesive approach, disliking group members to introduce differing ideas. Participant L felt pressured to match a Chinese group member's pace despite his limitations, while Participant D worked with Chinese peers to preserve

relationships outside academia, even against her wishes. Additionally, influenced by this collectivist premise, they preferred working with Chinese peers, as “ideas and thoughts were similar,” unlike their non-Chinese peers, who were perceived as more independent and less cooperative.

Participants’ willingness to compromise and their preference for working with Chinese peers stemmed from their closer interpersonal relationships in social interactions. This external factor shaped their interpersonal dynamics in academic settings, pushing them toward forming a common goal during group learning. Such social interactions, with their collective support or pressure, could reduce individual engagement in constructing new knowledge. For example, the group dynamic could allow other members to take over this process, or, as in Participant D’s case, she intentionally withdrew from social interactions with more creative peers to engage in knowledge construction due to group pressure.

*b) Social roles*

On the other hand, this collectivist social interaction also emphasises the importance of maintaining dignity, self-respect, and prestige, known as face. Because losing face signifies a failure to meet the fundamental expectations tied to the social roles one occupies (Ho 1976). In the context of university study, this means failing to meet the expectations associated with being a learner.

Findings of this research showed that some participants feared exposing weaknesses in public, avoiding asking questions or making mistakes in class. It was worth mentioning that the weaknesses participants feared exposing were mostly related to language, as language was more noticeable and easily perceived as a weakness, particularly among Chinese peers. For example, they might appoint a spokesperson, often someone with better English proficiency rather than superior academic abilities, to represent the group when communicating with students from other countries. Also, some participants

preferred different learning approaches to conceal their language shortcomings. As a case in point, Participant K preferred an online lecturer, as typing questions in the chat box allowed him time to refine his English. However, Participant I found it “ashamed” to ask questions this way, fearing errors in grammar or sentence structure could be seen by everyone. This fear of exposing weakness can be seen as a fear of losing face. The above findings also support existing research, which suggest that Chinese students studying in Western cultures are more sensitive to their status within a group, often internalising their thoughts and emotions (Lin and Yi 1997; DuPraw and Axner 1997; Wu and Hammond 2011; Ryan 2012; Wang 2018a).

However, these ‘weaknesses’ were not truly weaknesses, because participants were learners who, by nature, were expected to have questions or gaps in their understanding that they could share publicly to receive guidance or suggestions from educators and peers. However, influenced by the interpersonal dynamics in Chinese social environment, students are not expected to contribute new ideas until they thoroughly mastered the material (Jin and Cortazzi 2006). In this case, exposing their questions (or new thoughts) in public could challenge their expected social role as a ‘learner who has fully mastered the knowledge,’ thereby risking a ‘loss of face’ in academic settings. As an example, Participant G felt embarrassed making English mistakes in front of her Chinese peers, as they were more particular and would correct her publicly, whereas she felt more comfortable making mistakes in front of non-Chinese peers, who didn’t expect her to speak fluently.

*ii. Learning via social interaction in a hierarchical social environment*

As previously discussed, the hierarchical nature of Chinese academia places educators in a position of authority, while also fostering close teacher-student relationships, where teachers serve as both academic and personal mentors (Ryan 2010; Chang 2021). On the other hand, Western educational settings promote more equal relationships, with

lecturers in UK universities maintaining professional boundaries (Hutchinson 2015). These differing social environments shape distinct interactions with MKOs, influencing how students engage with educators.

a) *The indirect and direct communication*

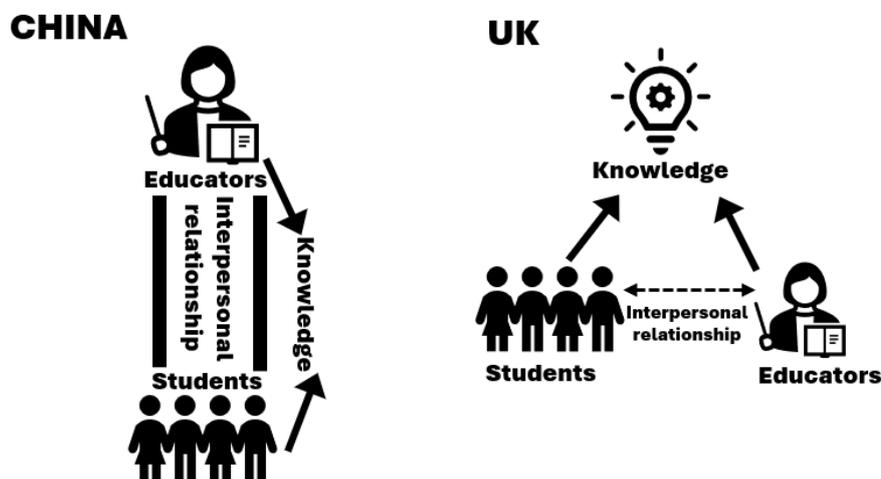
China's hierarchical social environment aligns with its high-context communication style, where communication is indirect and filtered through subjective perspectives. In this setting, educators hold significant authority, and knowledge is often gained through close relationships and networks (Ryan 2010; Chang 2021). These intimate interpersonal dynamics also lead students to view educators as mentors in both academic and personal matters. However, when transitioning to the UK's low-context environment, where communication is more direct and student-teacher relationships are less close (Wang 2018a; Holliman et al. 2024; Gao 2024), Chinese students could face very different interpersonal dynamics with their educators.

Based on the findings of this research, most participants observed that communication with UK lecturers and tutors felt equal, with some expressing no reservations during conversations. Participants valued educators' openness to differing opinions, with Participant K noting that "no questions were considered stupid," boosting his confidence. Additionally, some participants appreciated that UK educators maintained a clear boundary between students' personal and academic lives, avoiding personal biases in the marking process, which they found to be more impartial and "human-centred" compared to China. These findings further suggest that, compared to China, the UK academic environment operates as a more low-context setting with more direct communication. The relationship between educators and students is also more distant, as evidenced by the clear boundary maintained between professional and personal life (Hutchinson 2015).

b) *Learning via dialogue with MKOs*

Dialogue with MKOs is a key approach to constructing knowledge through social interaction (Vygotsky 1978), fostering shared understanding, challenging habits of mind, and uncovering how others interpret experiences (Freire 1970; Mezirow 2000). Therefore, different interpersonal dynamics between educators and learners can contribute to a distinct process of knowledge construction.

As illustrated in Figure 7.3, the educator-student dynamic in China is more hierarchical, with educators holding a higher position and students a lower one. Within this high-context culture, students construct knowledge through interpersonal relationships with their educators, resembling a ‘slide’ that channels knowledge to them. However, this hierarchical structure can create pressure in communication. For instance, Participant K described a fear of saying the wrong thing when speaking to teachers, while Participant H hesitated to ask questions due to the perceived distance between students and educators in China.



*Figure 7.3 Interpersonal dynamics and knowledge construction via dialogue (China vs. UK)*

In the UK social environment, due to a less hierarchical structure, a relatively low-context culture, and a looser student-teacher relationship, students and educators

engage in dialogue on the same level. As a result, communication is more equal, and students find it easier to construct knowledge through intersubjectivity.

#### ***7.4.2 The disorienting dilemma and the incremental transformation***

##### *i. The disorienting dilemma*

Participants' transition from a collective, hierarchical social environment with high-context communication to a more individualistic, egalitarian setting with low-context communication led to a shift in interpersonal dynamics. As they transitioned to a social environment that encouraged critique, their assumptions were challenged. More equitable communication with educators and looser teacher-student relationships brought about a disorienting dilemma, facilitating transformations in their habits of mind (Mezirow 1990; 2012).

These experiences also indicated a form of resistance to engaging in social interaction. For example, participants struggled to interrupt lectures to ask questions, likely due to fear of exposing 'weakness' and disrupting class harmony, rooted in their prior premise that learners should not question educators until fully mastering the content. According to Dewey (1934), such resistance marks the beginning of an experience, prompting individuals to pause and reflect.

##### *ii. The incremental transformation*

The challenges arising from different interpersonal dynamics created a series of disorienting dilemmas, ultimately leading to incremental transformation among the participants. For instance, after struggling to ask educators questions in class, several participants experienced feelings of shame or embarrassment due to their limited English proficiency. Some also began engaging in critical self-assessment of the sociocultural assumptions (Mezirow 2000). For instance, Participant H recognised that her difficulty in interacting with educators stemmed from cultural differences, which

prevented her from forming close relationships with them.

These findings suggested that some participants had entered the initial stages of transformation, marked by critical reflection. However, whether they could progress further to go through true transformation, challenge their prior premise about interpersonal dynamics, as well as generate educative experiences for personal growth, depended on their willingness to explore new roles and actions.

### ***7.4.3 The change of role: learner with diverse strategies***

Regarding participants' experiences related to the shift in interpersonal dynamics, the phase of exploring new roles was not as prominent and was, therefore easily overlooked by participants. However, this phase was crucial, as a genuine transformation could not be achieved without a shift in roles (Mezirow 2000).

*i. Learner with strategies for building relationships and maintaining social roles*

*a) Building relationships with educators*

In participants' previous learning experiences in China, they tended to prioritise building close relationships with educators to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, which was seen as already contained in the minds of teachers (Dewey 1938). In this context, the relationship acts as a 'slide' for knowledge transmission: the closer the relationship, the more solid the slide, and the less likely the learning channel is to collapse. As illustrated in Figure 7.4, students focus on strengthening interpersonal

relationships as a strategy to acquire knowledge more effectively.

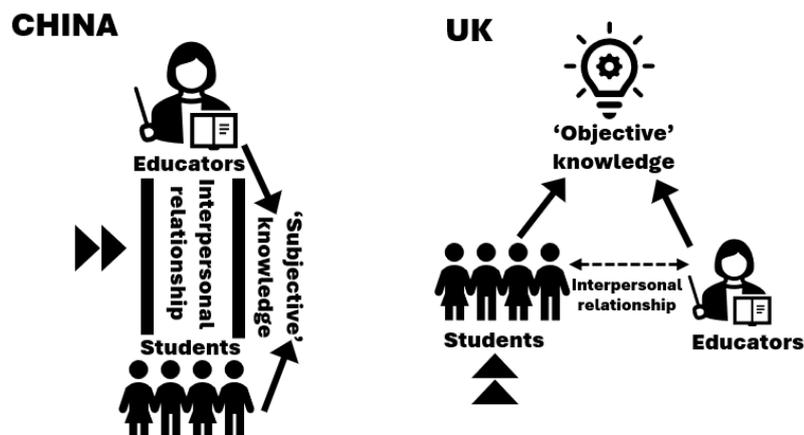


Figure 7.4 Different learner's strategies in China and the UK

Meanwhile, in a high-context environment, communication with educators often shapes the knowledge acquired, reflecting their subjective perspectives (Hall 1990). As a result, this knowledge becomes relatively 'subjective' for the learners, as it more closely aligns with the educators' interpretation rather than the learners' own understanding.

My findings showed that some participants preferred this learning strategy in their previous social environment and valued a relatively 'subjective' academic outcome. For example, Participant H expressed frustration with the "cultural differences" in communication, which made it difficult for her to build a closer relationship with her educators. As she interpreted these personal factors as key indicators of her academic progress and learning. These experiences, on the other hand, indicated that Participant H clung to the premise of social interaction with educators from her previous environment and failed to explore a new role, which hindered her further transformative learning.

b) *Maintaining social role within the peer group*

In addition, within the previous social environment, the learning strategy also extended to preserving participants' social roles within their peer groups. This learning strategy

could push students to internalise their critical thinking and limit their willingness to participate in class (Ryan 2012), and also unintentionally reduce the individual engagement in the process of constructing knowledge via reflective discourse. One example of maintaining social role while learning was participants downplaying personal achievements or struggles to avoid outshining others or disrupting group dynamics.

These experiences also highlighted that by sticking to their previous premise of social interaction in the new environment, participants missed the opportunity to express their own voice within the group. As a result, they overlooked the chance to acquire knowledge through the reflective discourse necessary for transformative learning (Mezirow 2000; 2012).

*ii. Learner with strategies for engaged learning*

However, when international students study at a UK university, the ‘slide’ of interpersonal relationships is no longer present, and the student-teacher dynamic become less influential. With looser student-teacher relationships, learners and educators are positioned more equally, where interpersonal connections play a smaller role in the learning process. In this new context, learners could focus more on themselves, becoming self-motivated, critical, and interactive to generate knowledge.

Additionally, in the UK, with a more direct communication style, learners could acquire information through clear and explicit dialogue (Liu et al. 2010; Guo 2013; Chang 2021), not only with educators but also with peers. Consequently, the knowledge constructed within this dynamic is more ‘objective,’ as the focus is on acquiring a direct and clear understanding through dialogue, which is centred on knowledge construction itself.

Some participant appreciated the more detached student-teacher relationship in the UK,

believing it made grading fairer by not taking personal emotions into account. For example, Participant B felt that in China, the close teacher-student relationship could cause “things to get mixed up,” with educators considering personal relationships when marking assessments. These experiences also demonstrated that through critical reflection on the former interpersonal dynamics in her previous social environment and their impact, Participant B began to explore a new role with a different premise in the new social environment, where less focus was placed on the teacher-student relationship and more emphasis was put on knowledge construction itself (Mezirow 2000).

#### ***7.4.4 The transformative and (mis)educative experiences***

##### *i. The transformative learning experiences*

Some participants, as they began to explore new strategies as learners and plan and take action for their new role, progressed to the later phases of transformative learning (Mezirow 2000). Participant M, for example, explained that conflicting feedback from different educators helped her develop a more objective mindset, shifting her view of educators from authoritative guides to sources of critical insight. This change diminished the hierarchical teacher-student relationship, enabling her to become more independent and self-motivated. Other participants, describing themselves as ‘bolder’ in communication, also felt less constrained by hierarchy, allowing for more direct and confident exchanges with educators. For instance, Participant D, initially stressed about tutorials, came to realise that dialogue with her supervisor provided valuable, objective suggestions.

Based on Mezirow’s (2000; 2012) TLT, through exploring the new learner role and taking action, these participants developed critical and self-motivated learning skills, acquiring more knowledge. They also built new connections with educators and peers, leading to a transformation in both their premises and learning processes. The premise

of the student-teacher relationship, where educators were seen as authoritative figures, gradually shifted. This was followed by a transformation in process, where the focus moved from building close relationships with educators to engaging more directly with the learning itself. As a result, these participants experienced a mindful transformation in their learning journey.

*ii. The educative experience*

As discussed, the disorienting dilemma could also be seen as resistance for participants to engage in social interaction with the new environment. However, by shifting a taken-for-granted premise, those who underwent the transformative learning process became more engaged in reflective discourse with their MKOs. As per Freire (1970), this change of premise, as a result of reflecting on their relationship with the sociocultural context, could prompt their action and lead to real learning

For example, these participants adjusted their attitudes towards teacher-student relationships, moving towards a more balanced and collaborative dynamic with their educators. As they described it, their interactions with MKOs became more “approachable,” “direct,” and “less judgmental,” which encouraged greater engagement in the discourse. Through this process, as they focused more on themselves as learners, these experiences became a moving force that drove them to develop more critical and open minds, making the process itself educative (Dewey 1938).

*iii. The miseducative experiences*

On the other hand, some participants struggled to embrace their new learner role, focusing more on building and maintaining interpersonal relationships with educators and peers. This hindered their interaction with the new social environment, preventing them from progressing towards a more mindful transformation.

A clear example was Participant H, who struggled to establish interpersonal

relationships with educators like those in China. She blamed the “mutual exclusion” between Chinese and non-Chinese students on educators, feeling their reluctance to engage influenced communication. However, by placing blame, she failed to critically reflect on her present experience and past assumptions (Dewey 1938), missing the opportunity to reconsider her initial impulse of building close relationships with educators. This highlighted a lack of continuity in her experience, where her premise remained rooted in a previous social environment, where knowledge acquisition was shaped by educators’ subjective perspectives.

Meanwhile, these experiences hindered participants’ integration into the new social environment. By focusing on building closer relationships, they became alienated and failed to transform their expectations of interpersonal dynamics. For example, Participant H experienced a “mental barrier” despite approachable educators, attributing her low marks to perceived personal bias. Similarly, Participant G missed opportunities to have dialogue with her educators online, assuming her educators might dislike her without face-to-face interaction. In both cases, seeking personal favour and closer relationship with educators rather than engaging in reflective dialogue diminished their interaction with the environment, obstructing personal growth, therefore, these experiences were miseducative (Dewey 1916; 1938).

#### ***7.4.5 Personal reflection***

##### *i. The allegorical reflection: adjusting to the different water conditions*

To interpret participants’ experiences of interpersonal dynamics in educational settings, I used the allegory of different water qualities to help me understand the data. If the swimming pool represents the overall environment surrounding the learner, then the density of the water reflects the closeness of interpersonal relationships in their learning settings, while buoyancy represents the support (or pressure) they receive. The depth of the water signifies the level of hierarchy between educators and learners: deeper water

suggests a more hierarchical system, whereas shallower water indicates a more egalitarian structure.

Under this allegory, the 'British pool' has lower water density compared to China, meaning weaker buoyancy and less external support or pressure. It also has shallower water, reflecting a more equal academic setting where educators and learners operate on the same level, reducing the pressure in discourse.

For participants undergoing transformative learning, reducing the influence of 'depth' and 'density' on their prior premises led to more educative experiences. For instance, those who shifted focus from building personal relationships with educators realised they were in shallower waters. This realisation reduced their previously assumed pressure in social interactions and allowed them to become more critical, independent, and self-motivated.

Ultimately, adapting to a new learning environment requires a thorough reflection on both past and present 'water conditions'. In other words, the sociocultural environment (Mezirow 2000). As swimmers cannot change the water quality, they must instead adjust their understanding of it and modify their swimming strategy. Similarly, participants who reassessed their learning strategies and adapted accordingly were able to progress and foster personal growth.

*ii. My personal experiences of student-teacher relationship in the UK*

In a well-being event I conducted among Chinese international PhD students in early 2024, it was found that Chinese doctoral students placed significant importance on their relationship with their supervisors. Both positive and negative experiences were often closely linked to this relationship, while feedback regarding their academic projects was notably scarce.

One student, for example, mentioned that when a disagreement arose with her supervisor, she recalled how the supervisor had invited her to their home for Christmas dinner, implying that their relationship was strong. She felt that, given this personal connection, the supervisor should not “put smaller shoes” on her, which was a typical Chinese saying of deliberately targeting or mistreating someone.

This focus on the relationship was particularly interesting, as the main purpose of a PhD was to generate original knowledge at a doctoral level, not simply to attend taught courses. Yet, many Chinese PhD students seemed to focus more on their relationship with their supervisor than on their academic progress. This further reflected a deep-seated premise: the belief that success and improvement were dependent on the relationship with the supervisor.

During my own supervision experiences with local supervisors, however, I found them helpful yet innovative, encouraging me to present new ideas. I paid less attention to personal relationships with them, even though they had children around my age. I never expected a ‘parent-child’ dynamic with them, despite occasionally discussing personal matters. This was still approached as a relatively objective knowledge construction process, where they provided both theoretical and personal suggestions.

This different premise reassured me when unexpected circumstances arose during the early and final stages of my PhD. When unforeseen challenges hindered my research, I was able to step back, reflect, and assess, allowing me to focus on my work rather than on building personal relationships with my supervisors. Moreover, this approach to interpersonal dynamics enabled me to engage in deep, objective dialogue with my supervisors, fostering further critical reflection and the construction of new experiences for continued growth (Dewey 1934).

## 7.5 Chapter summary

Chapter 7 applied multilayer theoretical frameworks to analyse and discuss the research findings based on four key themes. The discussion further addressed the research questions, particularly in relation to participants' experiences, the factors shaping those experiences, and the ways in which their development evolved during cross-cultural transition.

The discussion first emphasised the different environments participants transitioned into, based on themes developed from the data. It used the theoretical framework to explore how these environmental changes impacted their learning, and how their past experiences influenced learning via social interactions in the new environment. This included nuanced aspects not yet extensively addressed in published literature, such as the differing epistemological foundations of the UK and China, varying meaning perspectives, and the interpersonal dynamics related to cross-cultural learning strategies.

Discussion also highlighted that participants' experiences typically followed stages of resistance, reflection, change, and engagement. Most participants went through resistance and reflection. However, whether these experiences were truly educative or transformative depended on whether the participants reached a key stage: exploring a new role and actively taking steps to enact it. Educative experiences emerged from obstacles in participants' interactions with the new environment, which acted as disorienting dilemmas, triggering transformative learning. In addition, both educative and transformative experiences led to deeper engagement, knowledge construction, and personal growth during their cross-cultural transition. On the other hand, experiences that increased their isolation from effective interaction with the environment were considered miseducative.

Additionally, in interpreting and discussing the data, I drew on my own personal

experiences of cross-cultural transition and used allegorical reflection to compare participants' experiences to swimming in a different pool. Through these reflections, I not only analysed their experiences but also engaged in my own educative and transformative learning process.

The next chapter, Conclusion, will summarise the thesis's key findings and provide recommendations for future research and practical applications.

## **Chapter 8 Conclusion**

### **8.1 Research questions and purpose**

I was initially interested in understanding the learning experiences of Chinese international students in the UK, particularly their challenges and the factors influencing these experiences. Consequently, this longitudinal research was designed to go beyond the focus on how Chinese PGT students adjust to UK universities. Instead, it explored how their learning experiences develop throughout the year. While much of the existing research highlights adjustment and adaptation, it often overlooks how students make sense of these experiences and grow over time. By focusing on that development, this research aimed to fill a key gap in the literature and offer a more complete picture of their academic journey by addressing the following three key questions:

1. What challenges do Chinese PGT students experience as they transition into studying in UK HEIs, and what might be the potential factors contributing to these challenges?
2. How do Chinese PGT students interpret their learning experiences and the factors that shape them in UK HEIs?
3. How do Chinese PGT students' actions and decisions influence their development during their cross-cultural transition within UK HEIs?

Through a 12-month mixed-method longitudinal study conducted in 2022, I examined Chinese international students enrolled in full-time PGT programs across three distinct schools within a UK university. My research findings provided insights into the three questions outlined above.

## 8.2 Key research findings

This mixed-method longitudinal study analysed the experiences of Chinese international students, categorising the findings into four themes. Drawing on social constructivism, Dewey's theory of experience, Mezirow's TLT, and relevant literature, the discussion used the allegorical reflection of 'swimming in a different pool' to illustrate their learning experiences. Their experiences were compared to breathing different air, adjusting techniques, adapting styles, and navigating various water conditions while swimming in a different pool, offering my reflective understanding of their learning and transformation as the researcher. It also highlighted a significant turning point in their development. Whether their experiences became educative and fostered transformative learning depended on the exploration of a new role or action during the process.

### *8.2.1 Themes of Chinese international students' learning experiences in the UK*

Based on the qualitative and quantitative data collected, I categorised participants' learning experiences into four major themes, as shown in Table 5.1. The table highlighted these themes, including the *application of the English language*, where participants struggled with both expression and communication in written and spoken English. In *learning through reasoning and research*, they faced challenges in both intellectual and practical academic tasks, such as applying reasoning in reading and writing and conducting research. In *learning engagement*, their approach was less self-motivated, showing a lower preference for independent learning despite valuing interactive learning. Finally, in *interpersonal dynamics*, participants sought to maintain their roles within groups, prioritised group success, and experienced more equitable and impartial relationships with educators.

Table 5.1 Themes of participants' learning experiences

<b>Application of English language</b>	<i>Verbal interaction</i>	Ineffective communication
		Weaker class presentation
	<i>Academic writing</i>	Struggles with academic writing
		Challenges in precise expression
<b>Learning through reasoning and research</b>	<i>Reasoning in reading and writing</i>	Ongoing challenges in understanding literature and referencing
		Applying academic thinking and theories in academic writing
	<i>Conducting research</i>	Struggles with designing and conducting research
		Citing and referencing literature for research
<b>Learning engagement</b>	<i>Self-motivated</i>	Understanding assessment expectations; Limited guidance and non-directive feedback
	<i>Independent</i>	Preference for studying in a group; Less independence and creativity
	<i>Interactive</i>	Preference for interactive, communicative and engaged learning
<b>Interpersonal dynamics</b>	<i>Weakness in class</i>	Fear of asking questions Avoiding making mistakes Appointing a spokesperson in the group
	<i>Group success</i>	Achieving unified outcome Compromising for group interest
	<i>Relationship with educators</i>	Equitable communication Impartial marking

### 8.2.2 The allegory of Chinese international students' learning experiences

The allegory of 'swimming in a different pool,' drawn from my personal experiences, vividly illustrates the learning development of participants through my personal reflection. It depicts how they navigated the challenges of adapting to a new academic and cultural environment, much like a swimmer adjusting to a different pool. Through interaction with their environment, reflection on past experiences, and gradual adaptation of their approaches, participants underwent both a transformative learning process and an educative learning experience during their cross-cultural transition..

The table below, Table 8.1, presents an allegorical comparison between the learning

experiences of the participants and swimming. It also highlights the different environments to which participants had transitioned, representing the external conditions they interacted with during the transition. For language application in a new language environment, using a different language to study was likened to adopting a different breathing method for swimming. In learning through reasoning and research, using specific academic skills in a new academic environment in HEIs was compared to applying different swimming techniques to move forward. Learning engagement was described as adopting certain swimming styles to suit various learning environments. Finally, interpersonal dynamics were likened to varying water conditions, where the closeness of interpersonal relationships and social status could influence the participants' learning experiences in different social settings.

*Table 8.1 Allegorical comparison of participants' experiences in different environments*

<i>Themes of the learning experiences</i>	<i>Allegory of swimming</i>	<i>The different pool</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Application of English language	Breathing a different quality of air	Different language environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Language ≈ air quality</li> <li>✓ Using a different language to study ≈ adopting a different breathing method for swimming</li> </ul>
Learning through reasoning and research	Applying different swimming techniques	Different academic environment in UK universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Academic thinking skills ≈ swimming techniques</li> <li>✓ Applying reasoning and research skills ≈ applying swimming techniques to move forward</li> </ul>
Learning engagement	Adopting different swimming styles	Different learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Academic engagement approach ≈ swimming styles</li> <li>✓ Adopting a particular engagement approach ≈ using different swimming styles to move forward.</li> </ul>
Interpersonal dynamics	Adjusting to the different water conditions	Different social environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Density of water ≈ closeness of interpersonal relationships</li> <li>✓ Depth of the water ≈ social status between educators and learners</li> <li>✓ Adjusting to the different water conditions ≈ adjusting understanding of social interaction</li> </ul>

### ***8.2.3 Exploring new role as a catalyst for transformative learning and educative experiences***

#### *i. Transformative learning*

Another finding of this research was that the key factor in whether participants achieved transformative learning or progressed further into its phases to alter their frames of reference lay in the phase of exploring a new role, where they started to take action based on their critical reflection, leading to transformation and real learning (Freire 1970; Mezirow 2000).

In English language application, a transformation could begin when participants shifted from being English learners to English users, utilising the language as a tool to acquire knowledge through social interaction. In terms of learning through reasoning and research, this phase started when participants embraced a new role as knowledge explorers and creators, rather than knowledge receivers. This shift marked the development of their analytical and critical thinking skills, helping them adapt to the UK's academic environment. For experiences regarding learning engagement, the transformation involved a shift from being 'passive' recipients of instruction from educators to self-motivated learners who actively sought knowledge on their own, rather than relying solely on input from educators. In interpersonal dynamics, the role change was more subtle, as participants remained 'learners' but with diverse strategies. They gradually adjusted their learning strategies, shifting from building and maintaining relationships with educators and peers to focusing more on engaged learning. This process fostered a more critical and self-motivated approach to learning, ultimately leading to a transformation in their underlying assumptions.

By transforming their roles, participants redefined their previous assumptions through critical reflection, active discourse, and integrating past experiences into new contexts, which enabled them to engage more fully in the new sociocultural environment (Mezirow 2000; 2012).

*ii. Educative experiences*

In addition, findings of this research indicated that achieving this stage of transformative learning enabled participants to embark on an educative experience that promoted personal growth. Conversely, failing to do so could result in miseducative experiences, as outlined by Dewey (1934; 1938). These role shifts allowed participants to engage more actively with their environment, fostering greater interaction, and encouraging critical reflection on past experiences to inform better decisions and

actions in the new environment. Through this process, they developed the skills and adaptability needed to thrive in unfamiliar contexts, namely plasticity and dependency in learning (Dewey 1916; English and Doddington 2019). It was the ability to integrate new and unexpected ideas from the external environment, alongside the capacity to actively engage with it.

Based on the findings, becoming an English language user helped participants engage more deeply in English dialogues, fulfilling their initial need for self-expression and facilitating knowledge construction during their cross-cultural transition. Shifting to the role of a knowledge explorer and creator transformed their intellectual approach, allowing them to develop analytical and critical thinking skills essential for navigating a different academic environment. Adopting the role of a self-motivated learner enabled participants to cultivate independent learning strategies and interact more effectively with their new learning environment. Lastly, focusing on the process of acquiring knowledge propelled participants towards meaningful engagement in reflective discourse with MKOs, enriching their interactions within the educational setting and helping them gain new perspectives.

### **8.3 Practical suggestions to improve the experiences of international students in UK universities**

#### ***8.3.1 Workshops on Thinking for Academic Purposes for international students***

International students are an increasing part of the UK student body, with universities providing dedicated support services for immigration, fees, and student life (UKCISA 2025). Many also provide pre-sessional English courses to help non-native speakers develop academic language and literacy skills (Seviour 2015).

*i. Neglect of challenges in academic reasoning*

However, according to the findings of my research, the challenges encountered by international students during their studies in the UK extended beyond language proficiency. These challenges could originate from a divergent reasoning process shaped by a distinct sociocultural environment. For example, students from specific regions, like China, could face difficulties in aligning with the expected reasoning skills in Western universities. Cultural variances equip them with distinct intellectual tools during the learning process, leading to differences in complex cognitive skills development compared to the UK. Consequently, they may struggle with understanding the reasoning in academic literature and lack the analytical and critical thinking skills necessary to meet academic requirements. Unfortunately, these challenges are often overlooked by education providers in the UK.

In addition, in the context of studying in the UK, international students are often misled by the apparent language gap between them and local students. They may mistakenly attribute their challenges to language abilities and pay little attention to their reasoning process, fostered by their original socio-cultural environment, that truly impacts their learning and academic performance.

*ii. Workshop emphasis on thinking skills required for academic purpose*

Therefore, I recommend that UK universities not only provide English for Academic Purposes courses but also offer academic workshops tailored to address the specific needs of international students, particularly emphasising *Thinking for Academic Purposes*. The primary objective of the academic workshops is to acquaint international students with the distinctive academic requirements resulting from cultural differences in academic settings. Additionally, these workshops aim to develop essential academic

and thinking skills required in UK higher education for international students, with a particular emphasis on analytical thinking, critical thinking, and independent learning.

In UK higher education, conducting independent research is essential, starting with identifying a question and solving a problem without predefined guidelines. Students are encouraged to pursue their intellectual interests and seek knowledge through empirical evidence gathered via research. As a result, students at UK universities are expected to have a strong understanding of how to apply analytical skills when conducting independent research.

Moreover, UK universities also expect students to possess critical thinking skills. Students are expected to pose questions, participate in debates, and openly express disagreement or criticism in front of their teachers. Workshops focusing on such aspects of academic thinking skills and requirements can assist international students in better understanding the academic expectations of UK universities.

Last, these workshops can facilitate a smoother integration into the British learning environment when students initially leave their home country to study in the UK, thereby reducing the impact of learning shock during their cross-cultural transition.

### ***8.3.2 Peer mentoring scheme***

The findings of this research also suggested that Chinese PGT international students were from societies where individuals tend to gravitate towards forming close-knit groups within the same racial or ethnic category. Moreover, distinctions in language and cultural backgrounds among students from diverse countries can result in mutual isolation. To mitigate this situation, I recommend that UK universities implement a peer mentoring scheme designed to pair students from various nations. This scheme would foster reflective discourse between students and enhance their critical reflection by encouraging the interpretation of diverse experiences (Dewey 1934; Mezirow 1991;

2012). This process enables students to collaboratively build knowledge, deepen academic engagement, and navigate social challenges in a diverse cultural setting.

This proactive measure seeks to foster a supportive learning environment for both international and home students in the UK. By pairing international students with peers from diverse backgrounds, the mentoring scheme promotes collaborative learning, allowing them to exchange insights, guidance, and practical tips informed by different cultural perspectives.

Meanwhile, actively encouraging regular interactions between international and local students further enriches the learning experience through mutual understanding and exchange. For one thing, this two-way learning approach not only facilitates the integration of new international students into the academic and social aspects of university life in a foreign country but also broadens the perspectives of local students. It also serves as a platform to foster intersubjectivity via social interaction, where two individuals with distinct cultural backgrounds and varying habits of mind can reach a shared understanding by adjusting to each other's perspectives (Meizrow 1991; 2000). Consequently, these initiatives address both individual and institutional perspectives, contributing to a more culturally diverse educational environment in the UK.

### ***8.3.3 Cultural sensitivity training for staff***

The research findings also demonstrated that some tutors and lecturers in UK universities did not fully grasp the challenges faced by Chinese international students, primarily due to differences in meaning perspectives. Simultaneously, the students themselves might not have been aware of how their taken-for-granted habits of mind impacted their studies in the UK.

In addition, educators in UK universities might unintentionally overlook the fact that international students' socio-culturally influenced thinking skills differ from those of

local students, often attributing their challenges to language barriers or a perceived lack of understanding of academic expectations. This oversight, compounded by a mutual lack of understanding between international students and educators, significantly affected the learning experience of these international students in the UK.

From my point of view, in addition to providing support and workshop training for international students, it is suggested to offer cultural sensitivity training for all university staff. This training program is designed to go beyond surface-level awareness, aiming to deepen educators' understanding and support for the diverse needs of students from various cultural backgrounds. It specifically delves into how socio-cultural environment intricately shapes learners' understanding in pursuing knowledge, cultivate their way of thinking for academic activities, and influences their behaviours and preferences in the classroom.

By providing educators with insights into these hidden issues, the training empowers them to navigate the challenges faced by international students more effectively. As educators, they can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges international students encounter during their studies in the UK. With this awareness, educators can design tailored teaching activities and provide scaffolding to support the diverse thinking processes and learning approaches of students from various nations.

## **8.4 Contribution to knowledge**

### ***8.4.1 Understanding learning experiences of Chinese PGT students as development through longitudinal insights***

This research, conducted during the 2021-2022 academic year, examined the learning experiences of international Chinese PGT students, with a particular emphasis on their development and personal growth rather than solely their adjustment to a new cultural and educational environment. Unlike existing studies on international students' cross-

cultural transitions during this period, which have largely focused on anti-Asian sentiment and mental wellbeing, this research explored their engagement with different learning approaches. These included experiences with online and offline learning, perceptions of independent versus group learning, and collaboration with non-Chinese peers. By capturing these unique post-pandemic learning experiences, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of their development during cross-cultural transition.

In addition, unlike most existing studies on international students in the UK, which are typically based on data collected at a single point in time, this research adopted a longitudinal design that followed PGT international students throughout their entire one-year programme. Given the intensive and academically demanding nature of PGT study, capturing their experiences at two key stages, within the first three months and again after nine months of immersion, allowed for a more nuanced understanding of their development. This approach enabled a comparative analysis of how their learning and adaptation evolved over time. By tracing their transitions across the full academic year, the research offered a more detailed and dynamic representation of international PGT students' experiences, providing insights that single-timepoint studies often overlook.

#### ***8.4.2 Deeper unveiling of cross-cultural transition experiences***

##### *i. Exploring experiences with the impact of sociocultural environment*

Existing research on Chinese international students in Western higher education primarily focused on their acculturation strategies and adaptation modes when facing challenges abroad, highlighting disparities between Chinese and Western educational systems. However, this study discussed the epistemological differences between Chinese and UK education approach, focusing on how educators and students engage in dialogue. It further explored previously unexamined aspects, such as the challenges

Chinese students faced in transitioning from language learners to using English as a tool for knowledge contribution; how different meaning perspectives between learners and educators affected learning experiences in diverse academic settings; and how attitudes toward relationships with educators influenced overall learning experiences in UK universities. By focusing on the impact of social interactions within diverse sociocultural environments, this research offers a deeper understanding of how these interactions influence learning experiences during cross-cultural transitions, moving beyond a mere comparison of teaching and learning styles between China and the UK.

*ii. A multilayer analysis of cross-cultural transition experiences*

In analysing participants' experiences, I employed a multilayer theoretical framework, integrating three theories of learning. Social constructivism served as a lens to examine how participants constructed knowledge through social interactions. Dewey's theories of experiences provided a philosophical lens to understand how active engagement and reflection promoted personal growth and deeper involvement in the new environment. Finally, Mezirow's TLT offered a critical lens on how participants underwent transformative learning during cross-cultural transitions, re-evaluating assumptions and beliefs to achieve profound personal change. By synthesising these frameworks, the analysis provides a deeper, more nuanced interpretation of cross-cultural transition experiences, offering insights not yet explored in current published research.

***8.4.3 Interpreting cross-cultural transition experiences as a transient insider***

The flexible positionality of a transient insider allowed me to share a similar cultural background and academic experiences with the participants as an insider, while simultaneously adopting the stance of an outsider to interpret their experiences within an interpretivist epistemological framework. This unique positionality, in turn, makes both my analysis and discussion distinctive.

Additionally, as a mother of two British-born Chinese children and a professional teaching and student services staff member at the university, I have developed my own habits of mind through interactions with those around me for the past 14 years in the UK. This has allowed me to construct a more comprehensive and complex frame of reference in terms of the cross-cultural transition between China and the UK compared to other researchers. Throughout the data analysis process, I reflected on my personal experiences of living and studying in the UK to interpret the participants' experiences. For example, I drew on several personal experiences as a former international student in the UK, comparing the educational experiences I had in China and the UK. But also, I reflected on my experiences of raising children in different cultural environments to analyse the reasoning process shaped by varying meaning perspectives. By reflecting critically on these experiences of social interactions with different people in the UK, I was able to offer a deeper analysis of the cross-cultural transition experiences of Chinese international students, providing a different perspective from other studies.

## **8.5 Implication for practice**

### ***8.5.1 Aid UK universities in better comprehending Chinese international students***

With China emerging as the largest overseas market for UK universities, particularly in terms of international students, the substantial number of Chinese students studying in the UK has contributed significantly to the global diversity of the student population in UK universities. Therefore, education providers need to comprehend the distinctive characteristics of Chinese international students and what issues they might encounter during their studies in the UK. As this longitudinal research has deeply explored the experiences of Chinese PGT international students, its findings could serve as a valuable resource for education providers in Western countries, offering insights into the common challenges that Chinese PGT students might face during their study in the UK, so the education providers could better prepare to support them.

Also, this research could function as a reference for UK universities, guiding educators to a deeper understanding of the characteristics of Chinese PGT international students originating from their former learning environment in China. By fostering a nuanced awareness of the cultural dynamics and recognising how these factors influence their experiences in educational settings, institutions can proactively create a more inclusive and enriching environment for both domestic and international students.

Looking forward, as Chinese students stand as one of the largest demographics among international students in the UK, it becomes a strategic imperative for universities to enhance the overall experiences of this cohort, extending beyond the classroom to encompass various aspects of their life in the UK. This research could also shed light on ways to enhance their learning experiences in the classroom but also holds the potential to refine and improve student support services. The research findings and analysis would aid in establishing workshops and assistance programs, offering valuable support to international students throughout their academic and personal journeys.

### ***8.5.2 New insights for Sino-UK collaborative projects in China***

Since this research also compared the different learning experiences in China and the UK, especially in the higher education settings, it could offer new insights for collaborative educational projects conducted in China. Strategic partnerships between Chinese and British higher education institutions, often based in China, foster academic collaboration, joint research, student exchanges, and shared educational programs. So, this research could work as a reference for both parties to better understand the learning process, education systems and assessment standards in both countries. Awareness of the role of sociocultural factors in the knowledge construction process between China and the UK becomes pivotal for the success of such projects, fostering effective collaboration among partners to achieve shared educational goals.

### ***8.5.3 Reference for post-covid curriculum design***

Additionally, as a longitudinal study conducted in the post-COVID era, this research also provided valuable insights applicable to understanding the learning experiences of international students during a time when blended learning approaches were becoming more commonly adopted. In a time when the education landscape is adapting to more flexible teaching approaches, understanding international students' experiences and thoughts on blended learning is increasingly crucial. This study examined the specific experiences of Chinese students during this period, capturing their perspectives on the integration of online and offline learning. These insights may also inform the design of blended learning courses in UK universities in the post-COVID-19 context.

## **8.6 Limitations of this research**

### ***8.6.1 Limitations in data collection***

This study acknowledged several limitations in data collection that might have influenced its findings. Firstly, the sampling strategy and attrition rate impacted the sample size, potentially affecting the generalisability of the conclusions to other populations, such as Chinese international students from different universities, disciplines, or academic levels. Secondly, the use of Likert-scale questionnaires limited participants' responses to predefined options, potentially overlooking nuanced experiences. Incorporating open-ended questions could have addressed this limitation by capturing a broader range of perspectives. Additionally, the shared Chinese cultural background between the researcher and participants may have introduced biases, as participants might have been reluctant to disclose weaknesses due to cultural norms emphasising dignity and face-saving. This dynamic could have led to socially desirable responses, affecting the authenticity of the data.

### ***8.6.2 Limitation of using constant comparative analysis method for qualitative data***

Additionally, I was also acknowledged the limitation in the use of constant comparative analysis to analyse qualitative data collected. Even though for this research, this analysis method was used outside of grounded theory, it was still important for the data collected to reach a certain level of saturation, because it was adapted to conclude the pattern of sample's experiences. Inadequate data might compromise the accuracy of the resulting pattern if there isn't enough information for a thorough analysis. This study involved two rounds of semi-structured interviews with 14 participants, and each interview had a maximum duration of 60 minutes. However, the number of interview participants, coupled with the structure and length of the interviews, still posed a potential risk of not collecting sufficient qualitative data to comprehensively analyse and establish an accurate pattern of the sample's overall experiences.

### ***8.6.3 Researcher's bias in analysing research data and findings***

Lastly, the researcher's personal bias could exert an influence on the overall research. When interpreting the collected data, my conclusions and analysis were shaped by my own learning and living experiences in both China and the UK over the past decades. This could introduce the findings and conclusions. Recognising potential researcher bias, after data collection, I first ensured interview fidelity through faithful recording and transcription before data analysis to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. During the data analysis stage, I chose a rigorous qualitative analysis technique, employing constant comparative analysis on the qualitative data, which could enable myself to stay deeply entwined with the data and the words of the participants, rather than my personal assumptions. Throughout the process, I consistently kept in mind the influence of preconceptions on coding decisions and theme identification, as well as the importance of considering my own positionality when interpreting the results.

## **8.7 Areas of further research**

### ***8.7.1 Further research on international students' experiences of failing modules during their study in the UK***

In the course of my research, I interviewed two Chinese students who had failed modules during their studies in the UK. However, the research design itself did not include a specific or extensive focus on Chinese students who failed. Instead, the experiences of these two failing participants were coincidentally gathered during the data collection process. Therefore, in future research, a highly practical direction would be to continue investigating those Chinese international students who fail modules during their study in the UK, suggesting conducting more in-depth interviews and case studies to analyse their experiences. The research could further delve into the impact of language proficiency, learning and personal experiences, as well as course and module choices on their academic performance. By researching this specific phenomenon of Chinese students failing modules in the UK, the study helps to offer a more profound analysis of the experiences of international students and the underlying reasons behind such occurrences.

### ***8.7.2 Further comparative research of Chinese international students with and without previous studies in the UK***

Another worthwhile direction for research in the future is to compare the learning experiences of Chinese international students who completed their undergraduate studies in China with those who completed them in the UK. During the data collection process, a few research participants had taken part in collaborative Sino-UK programs before starting their PGT courses, completing part of their undergraduate studies in the UK. I recognised that they faced slightly different challenges during their studies in the UK compared to students without prior UK study experience. However, due to the

limited sample size, it was not possible to conduct a more in-depth investigation into the differences between these two groups of participants.

For further research, I believe this is also a highly worthwhile research direction. A comparative study could be conducted, with one sample group comprising students who completed a three-year undergraduate degree in the UK, and another group comprising those who completed their undergraduate studies entirely in China. Through in-depth interviews and case studies, a more comprehensive and detailed comparison of the impact of their previous learning experiences on their PGT studies can be explored.

### ***8.7.3 Future research to explore meaning perspectives in cross-cultural transition***

The discussion of this research highlighted how differing meaning perspectives shaped international students' understanding of academic reasoning and writing. Participants struggled to grasp the reasoning behind English academic material, while at the same time, local educators sometimes struggled to understand the logic and intentions embedded in international students' writing shaped by their different meaning perspectives. This reciprocal gap in understanding points to the significance of culturally embedded meaning perspectives in shaping both learning and assessment experiences.

Therefore, future research could continue to build on Mezirow's TLT by further examining how meaning perspectives influence international students' cross-cultural transitions. Future studies could explore how culturally shaped assumptions and expectations affect Chinese international students' interpretations of academic norms, engagement with unfamiliar pedagogical practices, and their responses to critical reflection. A follow-up research question emerging from this research could be: *How do Chinese international students' culturally rooted meaning perspectives influence their learning experiences in UK universities, and how do these perspectives develop*

*over time?* This would allow for a deeper understanding of how meaning perspectives are challenged, negotiated, or reinforced throughout the transition process, and how these shifts impact Chinese international students' learning and development in an intercultural academic context.

## **8.8 Researcher's personal reflection**

This research has been more than just a doctoral study project for me; it has also served as a profound reflection of my own experiences. Over the years of conducting this research, I have not only gathered and analysed results but also gained a deeper understanding of myself. This journey has enriched my interaction with the sociocultural environment around me, fostering my personal growth.

### ***8.8.1 Different interpretation of my own past experiences***

During this study, I reflected on my experience as an international student pursuing a master's degree in the UK in 2012. Despite the passage of a decade, many of the challenges I faced at that time still remained prevalent for international students today, persisting even with advancements in educational methods and technology. Even after working for over eight years as a student support staff member at a UK university, I still interpreted the difficulties faced by international students through a particular lens, often attributing them to factors such as their chosen field of study, English proficiency, or, occasionally, what I perceived as a lack of effort. However, my doctoral studies led to a profound shift in perspective. I came to understand that the sociocultural environment played a far more significant role in shaping learning experiences in the UK than I had previously acknowledged. Unexpectedly, this research also offered me a deeper understanding of my own past experiences.

As I concluded my research, I came to truly understand my earlier experiences from over a decade ago. I vividly recalled moments such as nervously delivering

presentations to my classmates, speaking quickly out of fear they would notice errors in my English pronunciation; feeling comfortable approaching lecturers privately but hesitant to participate openly in class; and finding essay feedback confusing and, at times, frustrating. These memories, once fragmented, became sharply defined. For the first time, I saw and understood my younger self with clarity.

### ***8.8.2 An educative experience and a transformative learning experience***

Moreover, this PhD journey has been a profound process of self-awareness and reflection, fostering significant personal growth and serving as an educative experience for me. It allowed me to undergo transformative learning during this academic journey.

Before undertaking my PhD, I had never studied social sciences or conducted related research. Understanding theoretical frameworks was particularly challenging for me. It was my first experience delving deeply into social science theories, and my interpretations often drew on observations of my children's cognitive development and my daily life experiences. For instance, to grasp the concept of social constructivism, I observed my children's phonics learning. This made me acutely aware of the differences between the learning environment I experienced growing up in China and the one my children are immersed in within the UK.

Meanwhile, when analysing the participants' experiences, I drew an analogy between observing my children's swimming lessons and the experiences of the research participants. This allegorical reflection deepened my engagement with both my personal experiences and those of the participants, fostering interaction with the environment and prompting critical reflection on previous experiences. Aligning with Dewey's (1934; 1938) concepts of continuity and interaction in educative experiences, my PhD journey exemplified an educative experience drove personal growth and development.

Through this journey, I also underwent a transformative learning process in my role as the mother of two British-born Chinese children. Stepping back, I transitioned from being a ‘mother with all the answers and unquestioned authority’ to adopting the role of a ‘learner.’ This shift enabled me to progress further in my own transformative learning. I developed a more open mindset, becoming receptive to diverse perspectives in a different cultural context. Simultaneously, this transformation deepened my interactions with my children. We became each other’s MKO, engaging in a mutual learning process. This reciprocal relationship not only enriched their development but also enhanced my own understanding, promoting growth for all of us within a shared learning environment.

Much like a swimmer adapting to a new pool, I found myself changing my swimming styles and developing new swimming techniques to engage in this unfamiliar pool. This transformation was not about becoming the fastest swimmer but about acquiring the skills to navigate and thrive in ever-changing waters. Ultimately, it’s this adaptability that ensures survival and growth, no matter how turbulent the currents.

## **8.9 Chapter summary**

This conclusion chapter began by outlining the research objectives and questions, followed by a discussion of the key research findings. It explored participants’ experiences, using an allegory to summarise their learning journeys during cross-cultural transitions, and highlighted the phases that determine transformative and educative experiences.

Based on the analysis and discussions, I proposed practical recommendations for UK universities and explored how these findings complement existing studies. This research also offers valuable suggestions for enhancing the post-COVID learning experiences of international students in British universities, as well as improving Sino-

British collaborative education programs in China.

The chapter concluded by addressing the limitations of sample selection, data collection, and analysis methods in this research. It also identified areas for further investigation. Finally, I reflected on the profound personal impact of this doctoral journey, which not only deepened my understanding of past experiences but also fostered personal growth through closer integration with my environment.

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# Appendix 1: Ethical approval

12/11/23, 10:01 PM

Email - Mengxing Zhou - Outlook

**FW: Your ethics application for How Chinese cultural values impact Chinese international students' use of English language in academic events in higher education institutions in UK? has been APPROVED**

Mel Evans <EvansM6@cardiff.ac.uk>

Thu 06/01/2022 13:31

To: Mengxing Zhou <ZhouM9@cardiff.ac.uk>

Dear Mengxing zhou

**Research project title:** How Chinese cultural values impact Chinese international students' use of English language in academic events in higher education institutions in UK?

**SREC reference:** 57

[Link to applications.](#)

The Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has given a favourable ethical opinion on the basis described in the application form, protocol and supporting documentation.

## Supporting Documents Received

- Consent Form Interview
- Consent Form questionnaire
- Information Sheet
- Interview Questions Outline
- Questionnaire
- Recruitment Email
- Ethics Application

**Please note that data collection can only be carried out once all final version of research tools have been deposited.**

\*\*\*\*\*

## Information to note

### Additional approvals

*This letter provides an ethical opinion only. You must not start your research project until all appropriate approvals are in place. Please note, all favourable reviews are conditional upon the following:*

**1. Research documents and data collection tools** – Final versions of all research documents (e.g. participant information sheets, consent forms, recruitment documents, etc.) and data collection tools (e.g. surveys, interview schedules, etc.) must be logged with the SREC prior to any data collection taking place. Applicants are also responsible for ensuring that any subsequent revisions or amendments made to research documents and data collection tools are also logged with the SREC (version control should be utilised by all projects).

**2. Health and safety** - Applicants must ensure that they have completed any health and safety risk assessments as needed prior to any data collection taking place. These risk assessments must be undertaken in

https://outlook.office.com/mail/rid/AAQkADHINGJIINDYwLTUyNjIjNDcwMI1hZDhLWlwZjE5ZGY3MTMwOQAQAEleOidJg0VAuaxWuMKDCWI%3D 1/2

accordance with Cardiff University policies and procedures.

**3. Disclosing and Barring Service (DBS) checks** - For research with vulnerable or 'at risk' populations, no data collection can take place until a relevant DBS has been secured and reviewed in line with Cardiff University policies and procedures. For students and lone researchers, you must confirm this information with the SREC. For larger research projects, Chief/Principal investigators are responsible for ensure that staff have relevant DBS checks before collecting any data and should keep a record of this information.

**4. Additional approvals** – It is your responsibility to check what approvals are needed for your research (including approvals from external stakeholders). You must not start your research project until all appropriate approvals are in place.

#### **Amendments**

Any substantial amendments to documents previously reviewed by the Committee must be submitted to the Committee via the Review List for consideration and cannot be implemented until the Committee has confirmed it is satisfied with the proposed amendments.

You are permitted to implement non-substantial amendments to the documents previously reviewed by the Committee but you must provide a copy of any updated documents to the Committee via the Review List for its records.

#### **Monitoring requirements**

The Committee must be informed of any unexpected ethical issues or unexpected adverse events that arise during the research project.

The Committee must be informed when your research project has ended. This notification should be made via the Review List within three months of research project completion.

#### **Complaints/Appeals**

If you are dissatisfied with the decision made by the Committee, please contact [socsi-ethicsoffice@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:socsi-ethicsoffice@cardiff.ac.uk) in the first instance to discuss your complaint. If this discussion does not resolve the issue, you are entitled to refer the matter to the Head of School for further consideration. The Head of School may refer the matter to the Open Research Integrity and Ethics Committee (ORIEC), where this is appropriate. Please be advised that ORIEC will not normally interfere with a decision of the Committee and is concerned only with the general principles of natural justice, reasonableness and fairness of the decision.

Please use the Committee reference number on all future correspondence.

**The Committee reminds you that it is your responsibility to conduct your research project to the highest ethical standards and to keep all ethical issues arising from your research project under regular review.**

You are expected to comply with Cardiff University's policies, procedures and guidance at all times, including, but not limited to, its [Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants, Human Material or Human Data](#) and our [Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice](#).

## Appendix 2: Recruitment poster in both English and Chinese

### Participants Needed for Research Study on Chinese International Students



*Are you a Chinese international student, who are currently studying a postgraduate taught courses (MSc or MA courses) with JOMEC/SOSCI/ARCHI? If so, we are recruiting participants for the research on your study experience in Cardiff University.*

**Participation involves:**

Completing 2 same questionnaires (in February and August 2022)

Attending 2 face-to-face interviews (in February and August 2022)

Any participants complete the two questionnaires/interviews, can receive Amazon gift voucher (worth from £5 to £15) as a thank you gift for taking part in the research.

Your participation in the research will be of great importance to study the cultural values behind international students' academic behaviors in UK. Please share the information with your classmates who might be interested in the project. I would really appreciate your help.

### 诚招：中国留学生参与博士课题研究

**对象：**

JOMEC/SOSCI/ARCHI 学院硕士在读的中国留学生

**研究课题：**

中国核心价值观与中国留学生在英国高校使用学术英语之间的关系

**参与方式：**

完成两份内容相同的调查问卷（10分钟左右，2022年2月和8月）

参与两次面对面录音采访（30-45分钟左右，2022年2月和8月）



**感谢礼：**

参与者将获得价值£5 to £15 的亚马逊购物券

您的参与将对研究国际留学生在英国的学习经历有非常重要的意义。如果您有符合条件的同学，麻烦您将这一信息告知他们，我非常期待他们的参与。

**If you are interested, please contact (感兴趣的话请联系或扫码)：**

*zhoum9@cardiff.ac.uk*

### **Appendix 3: Recruitment emails in both English and Chinese**

#### ***Email Title:***

We Need You: A Study on Chinese International Students in UK

博士课题研究招募参与者：中国留学生在英留学经历

#### ***Content in English:***

Dear participant,

My name is Mengxing Zhou, a postgraduate research student at School of Social Science of Cardiff University. I am kindly requesting your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting titled:

#### ***How Chinese cultural values impact Chinese international students' use of English language in academic events in higher education institutions in UK?***

The purpose of this study is to explore insights into the potential influence of Chinese cultural on the Chinese students' study in UK from the aspect of using English as tool to learn, as well as insights into how to provide the suitable support to improve this large group of international students' language skills during their study in the UK. **So, I am writing to recruit Chinese international students, who are currently studying postgraduate taught courses (MSc or MA courses) with JOMECC, to participate in my research.**

The study involves completing 2 same questionnaires in February and August 2022. If you are interested, you will also be invited to 2 face-to-face interviews followed by the questionnaires.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time up to 7 days after the interview/submitting the questionnaires. The study is completely anonymous; therefore, it does not require you to provide your name or any other identifying information.

Any participants complete the two questionnaires, can receive a £5 Amazon voucher as a thank you gift for taking part in the research. Gift vouchers will also be given to the participants for the interview for their engagement for this research.

If you are interested in the survey, please read the informed consent letter below and the attached Participant Information Sheet. Please send your consent back to me if you are interested, and I will send you the link of the survey. If you are interested to take part in the further interview, please contact me via email (details given below). Your participation in the research will be of great importance to study the cultural values behind international students'

academic behaviours in UK. **Please share the information with your classmates who might be interested in the project. I would really appreciate your help.**

Thank you for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Mengxing Zhou

Email: [zhoum9@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:zhoum9@cardiff.ac.uk)

***Chinese translation:***

同学您好!

我是卡迪夫大学社科学院的在读博士生，我的博士课题是研究“**中国核心价值观与中国留学生在英国高校使用学术英语之间的关系**”。这一课题的研究目的是为了深入探讨中国留学生群体在英国留学期间使用学术英语的情况，以及如何有效提高中国留学生在英国高校学习期间的英语应用能力。我的研究对象是 **JOMEC 学院硕士在读的中国留学生**，如果您符合这一条件，请考虑参与我的研究。

整个研究包含两份内容完全相同网上调查问卷，一份需要在 2022 年的 2 月份完成，另一份在同年 8 月份完成。同时，还会有 2 次面对面的采访，如果你感兴趣的话，请通过邮件联系我。同时，所有的参与都是自愿的，如果你不希望你的信息被应用到研究，你可以在完成问卷(或接受完采访)的 7 天内提出退出研究。整个研究采取匿名的形式，研究报告不会暴露你的名字或者任何个人信息。

为了对在 2 月和 8 月完成网上调查问卷的同学表达感谢，完成两份问卷后，**可以收到价值£5 的亚马逊购物券**。同样对于完成采访的同学，也可以获得购物券作为感谢。

如果您对调查问卷感兴趣，请阅读邮件附带的 consent letter 和 Participant Information Sheet。请您按照 consent letter 上的要求（复制标出的英文内容，发到我的邮箱，或者回复这一封邮件）。收到您的邮件之后，我会将问卷的链接发给您。如果您对之后的采访感兴趣，也请直接联系我。您的参与将对研究国际留学生在英国的学习经历有非常重要的意义。

如果您有符合条件的同学，麻烦您将这份邮件转发给他们，我非常期待他们的参与。

再次感谢您的参与。

周梦星

联系邮箱: [zhoum9@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:zhoum9@cardiff.ac.uk)

## **Appendix 4: Questionnaires**

### **General Instructions**

Thank you very much for participating in this study. I am investigating how Chinese students' academic experiences in Cardiff University during the 2021/2022 academic year. This questionnaire includes some questions about your background, and some about your experience of blended learning in Cardiff University. This study is a longitudinal research. The design of the study is to invite same candidate to complete the same questionnaire in February 2022 and August 2022, in order to explore longitudinally the impact of cultural values on the application of English language during the 12-month study in UK. I would really appreciate that you could leave your email address and I could get in touch with you in August and invite you to complete the same questionnaire again. Through the longitudinal

The questionnaire should take you no more than 30 minutes to complete. As a reward, if you successfully complete two questionnaires by end of August and both of the questionnaires are valid, you can receive a £5 Amazon voucher.

If you are very interested in the following interview and case study, please leave your email by the end of the questionnaire and state your interest.

**This questionnaire is for Chinese students studying postgraduate taught programs with JOMEC during 2021/2022 academic year, who has not have studied degree level course in UK (pre-sessional courses and summer schools are not included).** So please make sure that you meet the requirement.

I really appreciate that you could be as open and honest as possible in answering these questions and there are no right or wrong answers. If you have decided to participate in this study, please understand your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation.

## Questionnaire

### Demographic Questionnaire

- Please indicate your gender (male/female)
- Please indicate your age
- The title of the PGT program you are studying with JOMEC Cardiff University:
- Have you studied in UK before your current program? (Yes / No)
- Is your undergraduate degree taught in China? (Yes / No)
- What is your present level of English fluency? (Please enter your most recent IELTS or TOFEL score if you have one)

### **Your experiences of using English language in academic activities in Cardiff University**

The following seven sections are about your experience of using English language in the academic activities in Cardiff University. Please answer yes/no to top questions. If yes, please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences listed below. If not, please continue to the next question.

## Section 1 Lectures

### 1. Have you taken any online live lecture via Zoom so far for your course in Cardiff University?

No. (Please go to Q2)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>1.1 I find it difficult to understand the content the lecturer is presenting in English during the online lecture.</i>						
<i>1.2 I find it difficult to interrupt the lecturer during the online lecture and use English to ask them questions about the part I do not understand.</i>						
<i>1.3 During the online lecture, even when the lecturer asks us to raise the questions or concerns, I still find it hard to ask them questions in English.</i>						
<i>1.4 I find it hard to express my ideas and feelings in English in front of the lecturer and classmates during online lecture, even though they are not sitting with me.</i>						

**2. Have you taken any offline lecture so far for your course in Cardiff University?**

No. (Please go to Q3)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>2.1 I find it difficult to understand the content the lecturer is presenting in English during offline lecture.</i>						
<i>2.2 I find it difficult to interrupt the lecturer during the offline lecture and use English to ask them questions about the part I do not understand.</i>						
<i>2.3 During the offline lecture, even when the lecturer asks us to raise the questions or concerns, I still find it hard to ask them questions in English.</i>						
<i>2.4 I find it hard to express my ideas and feelings in English in front of the lecturer and classmates during offline lecture.</i>						

**3. Have you taken both online live lecture (including induction course) and offline lecture so far for your course?**

No. (Please go to Q4)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>3.1 I find it easier to understand the content the lecturer is presenting in English during online lecture than offline lecture.</i>						
<i>3.2 I find it easier to interpret the lecturer during the online lecture and use English to ask them questions about the part I do not understand than offline lecture.</i>						
<i>3.3 I find it easier to ask the lecturer questions in English, when they ask the students to raise questions or concerns, during the online lecture than offline lecture.</i>						
<i>3.4 I find it easier to express my ideas and feelings in English in front of the lecture and classmates during online lecture than offline lecture.</i>						

### Section 2 Seminar/Group Work/ Workshops

**4. Have you attended any online seminars/group work/workshops during your study with Cardiff University ?**

No. (Please go to Q5)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>4.1 I find it difficult to understand the content other classmates (non-Chinese) are presenting in English during online seminars/group work/workshops.</i>						
<i>4.2 I find it difficult to express my ideas and feelings in English in front of other classmates during online seminars/group work/workshops, even though they are not sitting with me.</i>						
<i>4.3 I find it hard to communicate with other classmates (non-Chinese) in English effectively during online seminars and group discussions.</i>						

**5. Have you attended any offline seminars/group work/workshops during your study with Cardiff University ?**

No. (Please go to Q6)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>5.1 I find it difficult to understand the content other classmates (non-Chinese) are presenting in English during offline seminars/group work/workshops.</i>						
<i>5.2 I find it difficult to express my ideas and feelings in English in front of other classmates during offline seminars/group work/workshops.</i>						

<i>5.3 I find it hard to communicate with other classmates (non-Chinese) in English effectively during offline seminars/group work/workshops.</i>						
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**6. Have you attended both online and offline seminars/group work/workshops during your study with Cardiff University ?**

No. (Please go to Q7)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>6.1 Compared to offline seminars/group work/workshops, I find it easier to understand the content other classmates (non-Chinese) are presenting online .</i>						
<i>6.2 Compared to offline seminars/group work/workshops, I find it easier to express my ideas and feelings in English in front of other classmates online.</i>						
<i>5.3 Compared to offline seminars/group work/workshops, I find it easier to communicate with other classmates (non-Chinese) in English effectively during online seminars and group discussions.</i>						

**Section 3 Class Presentation**

**7. Have you had experiences of making online live presentation for the course you are studying in Cardiff University ?**

No. (Please go to Q8)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>7.1 I find it difficult to use English to make online live presentation in front of the tutor and classmates, even though they are not sitting with me.</i>						
<i>7.2 After my online presentation, I find it difficult to use English to answer the questions related to my presentation, asked by the tutor and classmates.</i>						
<i>7.3 I find it easier to make online group presentation in English with other group members than making the presentation independently by myself.</i>						

**8. Have you had experiences of making offline presentation for the course you are studying in Cardiff University ?**

No. (Please go to Q9)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>8.1 I find it difficult to use English to make offline</i>						

<i>presentation in front of the tutor and classmates in the classroom.</i>						
<i>8.2 After my offline presentation, I find it difficult to use English to answer the questions related to my presentation, asked by the tutor and classmates.</i>						
<i>8.3 I find it easier to make offline group presentation in English with other group members than making the presentation independently by myself.</i>						

**9. Have you had experiences of making both online live presentation and offline presentations for the course you are studying in Cardiff University?**

No. (Please go to Q10)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>9.1 Compared to offline presentation, I find it easier to use English to making live presentation online.</i>						
<i>9.2 Compared to offline presentation, I find it easier to use English to answer the questions related to my presentation, asked by the tutor and classmates online.</i>						
<i>9.3 I find it easier to make group presentation in English with other group members than making the presentation independently by myself, regardless of online or offline.</i>						

## Section 4 Tutorials

### 10. Have you attended the one-to-one online tutorial with your personal tutor or course leader?

No. (Please go to Q11)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>10.1 I find it hard to understand the content my personal tutor or course leader is presenting in English during our one-to-one offline tutorials.</i>						
<i>10.2 During online tutorials, even though I know every English word my personal tutor or course leader is talking about, I find it hard to understand the meaning of their feedback.</i>						
<i>10.3 I find it hard to express my ideas and feelings in English during one-to-one online tutorial , even though my personal tutor or course leader is not sitting in front of me.</i>						
<i>10.4 I find it hard to ask my personal tutor or course leader questions in English during our one-to-one online tutorials.</i>						

<i>10.5 I find it hard to communicate with my personal tutor or course leader in English effectively during our one-to-one online tutorials.</i>						
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**11. Have you attended the one-to-one offline tutorial with your personal tutor or course leader?**

No. (Please go to Q12)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>11.1 I found it hard to understand the content my personal tutor or course leader is presenting in English during our one-to-one online tutorials.</i>						
<i>11.2 During offline tutorials, even though I know every English word my personal tutor or course leader is talking about, I find it hard to understand the meaning of their feedback.</i>						
<i>11.3 I find it hard to express my ideas and feelings in English during one-to-one offline tutorial when my personal tutor or course leader is sitting in front of me.</i>						
<i>11.4 I find it hard to ask my personal tutor or course leader questions in English during our one-to-one offline tutorials.</i>						

<i>11.5 I find it hard to communicate with my personal tutor or course leader in English effectively during our one-to-one offline tutorials.</i>						
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**12. Have you attended both online and offline tutorial with your personal tutor or course leader?**

No. (Please go to Q13)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>12.1 Compared to offline tutorial, I find it easier to understand the content my personal tutor or course leader is presenting in English during online tutorials.</i>						
<i>12.2 Compared to offline tutorial, I find it easier to understand the meaning of their feedback online.</i>						
<i>12.3 Compared to offline tutorial, I find it easier to express my ideas and feelings in English during one-to-one online tutorial when my personal tutor or course leader is not sitting in front of me.</i>						
<i>12.4 Compared to offline tutorial, I find it easier to ask my personal tutor or course leader questions in English during our one-to-one online tutorials.</i>						
<i>12.5 Compared to offline tutorial, I find it hard to communicate with my personal tutor or course leader in English effectively during our one-to-one online</i>						

<i>tutorials.</i>						
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### Section 5 Reading and Quoting Academic Materials

#### 13. Have you got experiences in reading and quoting English materials for your study in Cardiff University?

No. (Please go to Q14)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>13.1 I find it difficult to understand the academic materials in English, so I need to spend a lot of time reading academic journals and papers.</i>						
<i>13.2 I find it difficult to find required academic journals and materials in English for my study in Cardiff University.</i>						
<i>13.3 I find it difficult to quote and reference academic materials in English during my study in Cardiff University.</i>						

### Section 6 Academic Writing

#### 14. Have you got experience in writing academic essay/dissertation in English and received feedback from the marker?

No. (Please go to Q15)

Yes. (Please tick the one that applies to your personal experiences)

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>slightly disagree</i>	<i>partly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
<i>14.1 I find it hard to understand the essay/dissertation question and requirement in English.</i>						
<i>14.2 I find it hard to write academic essay/dissertation in English, especially that I feel difficult to express my ideas and thoughts in English properly.</i>						
<i>14.3 I find it difficult to complete the essay/dissertation in English by myself, so I prefer to do the work as a group, or seek help from my classmates.</i>						
<i>14.4 I find it difficult to understand the meaning of the feedback from the marker, even though I know every word of the English they use.</i>						
<i>14.5 I personally think my essay/dissertation is under-marked, and I should receive higher mark for my work in English.</i>						

## Section 7 Open Questions

### 15. Open-ended questions:

Do you have encountered any other difficulties while using English language as a tool to learn in your academic study here in Cardiff University?  
If so, please specify. Thanks for your participating in the survey.

If you wish to be invited to complete the second questionnaire, please leave your email or other contact details:

#### **Email:**

If you wish to be invited to the one-to-one interview, please specify your interest here:

Yes, I am willing to be interviewed as part of the case study.

No, I am not willing to be involved in the further research.

## Appendix 5: Semi-structured interview outline

*\*The interviews will not be linked with the questionnaires. Participants for the interview are not required to complete the questionnaire before the interview.*

1. General background of the participants, including age, academic experiences before attending Cardiff University, language test scores, etc.
2. Information of the current PGT program:
  - a) Course title
  - b) Teaching methods
  - c) Class size
3. What is the general feedback of the course they are taking?
4. Did you have any specific experiences during your studies? How do you interpret them?
5. A comparison of the offline and online teaching methods in the below areas. Do you feel generally easier to communicate and present their thoughts/feelings in English online? If so, any particular reason?
  - a) Lecture
  - b) Seminar/Group Work/ Workshops
  - c) Presentation
  - d) Tutorials
6. How do you find writing essays in English? Do you think it is due to your language ability or other reasons? Please provide some examples.
7. What is your experience when reading English academic materials? Do you feel it takes a significant amount of time? How has your experience been in finding relevant materials for academic writing and citing sources?
8. Do you feel your academic writing is under-marked? Have you ever disagreed with the feedback from markers? How well do you understand the marking criteria and requirements?