

Chapter 13

Understanding Cross-Cultural Experiences Through Multilayered Theoretical Frameworks as a Transient Insider Researcher



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1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the rationale and journey in selecting a suitable theoretical framework for my doctoral research, which explores international students' experiences in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom (UK). It reflects on the process of engaging with a range of theories and developing a multilayered framework that not only informed the research questions but also shaped their formulation. The selected framework was intentionally aligned with the research paradigm and the researcher's positionality as a transient insider within the context of this research.

1.1 A Longitudinal Study of International Students

My doctoral research, titled "Swimming in a Different Pool," is a small-scale longitudinal study that explores the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate-taught (PGT) international students at a British university during the academic year 2021–2022. It aims to understand the cross-cultural transition experiences of this specific group within British HEIs, as they navigate a different educational context from that of their home country.

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1.1.1 The Research on Chinese International Students

For international students, adapting to a new academic environment often means navigating major differences in educational systems, classroom norms, and expectations (Bache & Hayton, 2012; Hall & Sung, 2009). These contrasts are especially evident at the postgraduate level, where expectations differ sharply from undergraduate study. The PGT programs in British HEIs are particularly intensive, typically lasting only one year (Chen, 2023; Coneyworth et al., 2020). Along with the fast pace and heavy workload, students are expected to demonstrate strong academic independence, initiative, and critical thinking. These expectations can be challenging for those from systems that emphasize memorization and exam-oriented learning (Melles, 2009; Watson & Reissner, 2010). This transition is both pedagogical and cultural, requiring continuous support and reflection.

Despite this, most existing research focuses on undergraduates, leaving postgraduate experiences relatively underexplored (Holliman et al., 2023; Quan et al., 2016). Recent studies have called for more qualitative research on the lived experiences of Chinese-taught master's students, given the impact of cross-cultural adjustment on academic performance and psychological well-being (Holliman et al., 2022). Chinese international students represent one of the largest groups within the international student population across Western universities, leading to growing interest in their academic and cultural transitions.

On the other hand, the research on international students in Western higher education assumes that success depends on adapting to host cultural norms. Studies on Chinese students often emphasize adjustment, acculturation, and language proficiency, focusing on learning strategies, adaptation processes, and English competence (Cai, 2013; Li et al., 2022; Xiong et al., 2025). More recent critical work, however, challenges this deficit view that frames international students by what they lack rather than what they contribute (Heng, 2018; Lomer et al., 2023; Mittelmeier et al., 2024; Moosavi, 2020). Such perspectives question how dominant discourses of internationalization place the burden of adaptation solely on students (Ryan, 2016). Although some longitudinal studies explore Chinese postgraduate students' longer term adjustment (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Chien, 2015; Quan et al., 2016), many still equate success with assimilation into Western norms, overlooking how learning experiences evolve within short, intensive postgraduate programs.

1.1.2 The Research Questions and Significances of My Research

Building on my long-standing interest in international student experiences, which is shaped by my own background as a Chinese PGT student 14 years ago and nearly a decade of working and teaching in British higher education, this research set out to explore the learning experiences of Chinese PGT students during their cross-cultural transition at a UK university.

The main research question of the research was: *What are Chinese PGT international students' cross-cultural transition experiences at a UK university?* To explore this in depth, 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?*

By answering the above questions, the research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of Chinese students' learning experiences, with a particular focus on their development rather than mere adjustment to a new cultural and educational environment. The study sought to address a key gap in existing literature, which often emphasizes challenges and adjustment but pays insufficient attention to how international students interpret and develop through their experiences over time. My unique positionality, shaped by personal and professional immersion in UK HEIs, offers a unique perspective that informs a deeper analysis of these experiences, both as an educator and as a former international student.

Insights from this research are expected to inform institutional policies and strategies to better support international students, particularly in enhancing intercultural understanding, inclusive teaching practices, and academic development. In addition, the findings aim to benefit future Chinese PGT students by offering guidance on navigating the challenges of studying in a different academic and cultural setting.

1.2 Theoretical Alignment with Research Purpose and Positionality

Theoretical frameworks play a crucial role in shaping the design, interpretation, and analytical depth of my research. As the research focused on learning experiences in a cross-cultural context, engaging with theory is not merely an academic exercise: it is a methodological and conceptual necessity.

Firstly, the very nature of cross-cultural transition necessitates a theoretical lens that captures both external and internal factors influencing the learning experience. Chinese students studying in the UK navigate an environment that is not only structurally and pedagogically different from their home education system but also culturally distinct. Their experiences are shaped by institutional structures, pedagogical expectations, language practices, and broader sociocultural norms, which are the external elements that significantly influence how they engage with learning. Equally, however, their internal processes, such as prior knowledge, personal beliefs, identity, emotions, and reflective capacities, are crucial in understanding how they interpret, respond to, and grow through these experiences. A theoretical framework, or set of

interlinked frameworks, is therefore essential to conceptualize this dynamic interplay between environment and cognition. Without it, the analysis risks being fragmented or superficial, failing to account for the complexity of cross-cultural educational experiences.

Secondly, as discussed, much of the literature on international students conceptualize their experiences in Western countries primarily through the lens of adjustment or acculturation (e.g., Chien, 2015; Quan et al., 2016). These approaches often depict students' experiences as a linear process of adapting to the host institution's cultural and academic norms, defining success in terms of conformity or integration. While such perspectives provide valuable insights into the challenges of cultural transition, they are limited in explaining how students develop intellectually and personally over time. In contrast, this research seeks to explore the developmental nature of Chinese students' learning experiences, recognizing them as an ongoing process shaped by interactions between internal and external factors. Therefore, it is important to employ theories that offer a holistic, development-oriented understanding to move beyond adjustment to examine how individuals construct meaning, re-evaluate assumptions, and undergo transformation through engagement in new educational settings.

Finally, the researcher's positionality underscores the need for a carefully chosen theoretical framework. As a "transient insider" (Roberts, 2018, p. 116), I shared cultural and linguistic familiarity with participants, enabling an emic and empathetic understanding while maintaining analytical distance. My dual identity, as a former international student and a current UK-based educator, offers both insider insights and institutional awareness. Having lived in the UK for nearly half my life and worked in higher education for years, I hold a nuanced perspective shaped by both cultures. The theoretical framework must therefore support a research approach that promotes shared understanding while maintaining critical rigor, offering a structure in which this dual position can be meaningfully situated.

This chapter reflects on the process of engaging with a range of theoretical perspectives and developing a multilayered framework for my Ph.D. research. The chapter is organized into four sections. The first section introduced the research background, its significance, and explained why the theoretical framework was essential for my research. The next section will discuss the relevant theoretical approaches I considered when selecting the most appropriate theories to construct the framework. The third section will focus on the three theories chosen to form the framework and the rationale behind their selection. The chapter will conclude with a summary and further reflections on my experience as a researcher, offering a vivid embodiment of the theoretical framework through my doctoral research.

2 Relevant Theoretical Frameworks

This section presents the theoretical frameworks considered for studying international students' learning experiences, outlining key concepts, exploring their relevance to cross-cultural transitions, and critically evaluating their suitability for my research.

2.1 *Constructivism and Social Constructivism in Education*

Constructivism in education is an epistemological theory that sees learning as an active process in which individuals construct knowledge through experience and reflection (Akar, 2003). Building on Piaget's (1967) work on cognitive development, it explains how learners integrate new experiences with prior knowledge, while adult learning involves ongoing reflection that reshapes understanding (Mezirow, 1991). In classrooms, constructivism promotes active engagement and co-construction of knowledge through teacher–student interaction (McLeod, 2024; Sims et al., 2001). Vygotsky (1978) extended this perspective with sociocultural theory, emphasizing how social interaction and cultural context shape learning, forming the basis of social constructivism, which views learning as a collaborative, culturally embedded process (Cherry, 2022). Thus, while constructivism focuses on individual cognition, social constructivism highlights social and cultural influences, and together they underpin many contemporary learning theories.

2.1.1 Dialogue and Social Interaction

Social constructivism views dialogue as central to learning. Vygotsky (1978) contends that cognitive development occurs through collaboration with more knowledgeable others (MKOs), with language functioning as a key cultural tool for mediating thought and transmitting knowledge. Through such interactions, learners internalize cultural values and develop higher order thinking (McLeod, 2024). Building on this, scholars such as Dewey (1934), Freire (1970), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasize the sociocultural environment's role in shaping learning through engagement with physical and social contexts. Knowledge is thus constructed through social interaction within interconnected systems, including family, school, community, and society, where ideas are exchanged and transformed (Akar, 2003).

Social constructivism has faced criticism for prioritizing the social factors over the individual's role in learning (Ameri, 2020; Resnick, 1996). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, in particular, may underemphasize individual and biological factors, limiting its explanation of cognitive complexity. Additionally, critics like Hirsch (1987) and Fox (2001) argue that constructivism and social constructivism's strong focus on

active learning overlooks the value of passive learning, such as memorization, which can sometimes be meaningful.

2.1.2 Applying Social Constructivism to International Students' Experiences

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; Liu, 2023; Schartner, 2014). Social constructivism is particularly relevant for examining the experiences of international students, whose learning is often shaped by cross-cultural communication and engagement. Recent research in UK higher education has drawn on social constructivism and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory to explore international students' engagement and learning. For instance, Ibrahim (2024) investigated how international students developed autonomous learning behaviors in blended learning environments during COVID-19, emphasizing the importance of social interaction, cognitive presence, and teacher support. Similarly, Wei (2025) conducted a mixed-methods study on how international postgraduate students navigate language barriers through the lens of Vygotsky's theory.

2.2 Dewey's Theory of Experiences

Another theory I examined is Dewey's (1916, 1934, 1938) theory of experience, which views learning experience as a process shaped by the interaction between the learner and their environment. This perspective aligns closely with social constructivism, however, while social constructivism (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978) focuses primarily on the social and cultural context of learning, Dewey places greater emphasis on individual reflection and growth within experience.

2.2.1 Experience and an Experience

According to Dewey (1934), experience is a transaction taking place between an individual and their surroundings, as experience does not "occur in vacuum" (Dewey, 1938, p. 40). Our experiences are continuously renewed, shaping our beliefs, feelings, and actions within social groups. These experiences influence our preferences, emotions, and interactions, impacting how we approach future situations. An experience, in particular, is a complete, standout event from general experiences, which is more structured and memorable. An experience begins with an initial impulse that drives expression, and when obstacles arise, reflection on past experiences helps overcome resistance, strengthening this impulse and making actions more intentional

(Dewey, 1934). Accordingly, an experience is unified and coherent, with each part smoothly connected to the next, creating a continuous and meaningful progression. Ultimately, the experience culminates in a fulfilling moment where all elements integrate, forming a complete whole that shapes the individual's growth and future development.

Dewey (1916, p. 294) argues that learning is the process of gaining meaning through experience, which involves both “doing” and “undergoing,” as well as gradually connecting these actions over time. While “doing,” according to Dewey, refers to individual's active engagement in an experience, “undergoing” captures the simultaneous way that the individual is affected by the environment. Experience accumulates over time and becomes richer as we explore the various connections between ourselves and the world. 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 (Dewey, 1934).

2.2.2 Experience and Growth

Through his multiple publications, Dewey (1916, 1934, 1938) clarifies that growth is how humans develop by learning from their experiences and through interactions with the environment. Considering this, human being's change over a lifetime via interaction with the environment could be defined as growth (Dewey, 1916; English & Doddington, 2019). Dewey (1916) highlights education as a form of growth that provides an inherent energy or ability to develop.

Dewey (1938) considers continuity and interaction as two principles of experience that are interconnected and essential for learning. Continuity means that each experience builds on the previous and shapes future understanding, while interaction refers to the dynamic relationship between the learner and their environment, highlighting the social nature of experience. These principles reflect the temporal and contextual dimensions of learning, determining its meaningfulness and potential for growth. Dewey (1938) distinguishes educative experiences, which connect past, present, and future learning, from miseducative ones that hinder development. Educative experiences often involve resistance, exploration, and completion, fostering ongoing growth (English & Doddington, 2019).

Despite essential components of Dewey's (1916, 1938) theory of experiences, some critics argue that Dewey is overly optimistic about human rationality and the power of education, overlooking the complexities of human behavior (Hook, 1985). Hirsch (1996) also contended that Dewey's faith in unsupervised human growth is naive, arguing that individuals need structured guidance. Another major critique concerns Dewey's research methodology, which is often seen as lacking empirical evidence, relying more on philosophical reasoning than systematic data collection (Hirsch, 1996; Kliebard, 1995).

2.2.3 Dewey's Theories and Global Learning in HEIs

While Dewey's (1934, 1938) 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 & Wadley, 2022). As such, Dewey's theories of experience offer significant potential for conceptualizing cross-cultural transitions and the analysis of international students' experiences in higher education 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 & Wadley, 2022). For example, research (Landorf & Wadley, 2022) suggests that Dewey's theory is widely applied in global learning in international universities by fostering collaboration among students from diverse cultural and intellectual backgrounds to address complex and cross-border challenges. Therefore, Dewey's theory of experience and educative experience could offer a valuable framework for conceptualizing international students' learning experiences in various academic activities for my research.

2.3 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Similar to Dewey's theories of experience, while Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1994) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) emphasizes the role of experience and environment in development, it is particularly designed to explore the role of environmental factors.

2.3.1 The Five Ecological Systems

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1994) EST posits that human development is shaped through dynamic interactions across multiple layers of environment, ranging from close, personal settings to wider societal and cultural contexts. These layers, identified as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (as shown in Fig. 1), are not isolated components but rather interrelated and nested structures. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1994), development begins within the immediate environment of the individual (the microsystem) and extends outward toward broader influences, such as cultural norms and historical context (the macrosystem and chronosystem).

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1994) provides definitions for each of the five systems in their EST theory. The microsystem refers to the immediate environment in which individuals actively participate, shaped by both physical and social features. Examples or microsystem are relationships with family, school, or friends. The mesosystem involves the interactions between different microsystems; for instance, a child's parents may engage with their school life by attending parent–teacher meetings. The

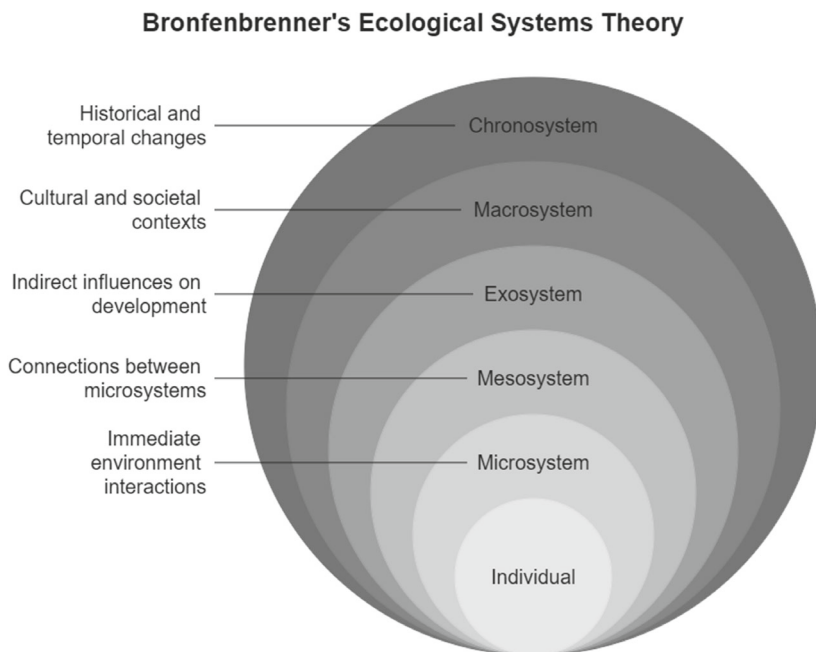


Fig. 1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

third level is the exosystem that encompasses broader contexts, such as local government, media, and community networks, which indirectly affect individuals even if they do not have direct involvement in these entities. The macrosystem includes wider cultural, economic, political, and legal systems that influence the functioning of all other layers. The fifth and final level is the chronosystem that introduces dimensions like time, accounting for changes over the life course, and across sociohistorical contexts.

However, critics like Tudge et al. (2009) argue that the usefulness of EST for understanding lived experiences is limited by the conceptual vagueness of its system boundaries. This limitation makes it challenging to apply the theory consistently in empirical research. Other critics (e.g., Fine & Cross, 1997) contend that the theory lacks an attention to social power dynamics, systemic inequality, and structural racism, particularly within the macrosystem.

2.3.2 EST and International Students

EST provides a framework to examine the interconnectedness of individual agency and environmental systems. Instead of viewing these systems in isolation, EST conceptualizes them as interdependent components within a unified, dynamic context (Liu, 2023). Building on this foundation, researchers have applied EST to explore

how students in higher education institutions navigate complex educational and cultural environments (e.g., Barber et al., 2015) and to examine international students' experiences in higher education. For example, Liu (2023) applied EST to analyze cultural transitions, considering all five systems and the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments. Understanding international students' cultural transitions requires attention to multiple layers of experience, including home environments, student–supervisor relationships, classroom dynamics, workplace contexts, host cultural assumptions, and personal engagement with these settings.

Furthermore, Jones (2017) expanded EST in the higher education context by identifying seven key microsystems that shape undergraduate students' experiences. These microsystems offer a framework to account for both academic learning and personal development. However, its applicability to postgraduate contexts remains uncertain, as it was originally developed for undergraduate populations. Another concern relevant to my study, conducted in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, is that EST's emphasis on personal background and environmental influences raises ethical considerations related to the privacy of participants' contextual experiences.

2.4 Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow's (1978, 1991, 2012) Transformative learning theory (TLT) has been adopted by scholars across various disciplines. The theory continues to evolve (Kitchenham, 2008; Lilley et al., 2015) and is regarded as a foundational theory in adult learning.

2.4.1 Mezirow's Understanding of Learning

As Mezirow (1991, 2012) describes, adult learning involves a dialectical process of interpreting experiences, where individuals integrate what they already understand with new experiences. According to Mezirow (1991, 2000, 2003, 2012), people interpret experiences through meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Meaning schemes are the beliefs, concepts, feelings, and judgments that guide interpretation and can change through reflection, while meaning perspectives are the deeper frameworks that shape how individuals see and understand the world (Fleming, 2018; Mezirow, 1991). To clarify, meaning perspectives are broader frameworks for interpreting experience, while meaning schemes are more specific cognitive structures operating within this larger framework. A frame of reference is a meaning perspective that shapes how people interpret experiences and interactions (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). It includes two parts: habits of mind, which are the underlying assumptions and predispositions that guide interpretation, and points of view, which are the specific expressions of those habits (Fleming, 2018; Mezirow, 2000).

2.4.2 Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow (2012), learning occurs in four ways: by expanding existing frames of reference, acquiring new ones, transforming points of view, and transforming habits of mind. This process involves gradually reshaping deeply held perspectives or mental habits, leading to significant changes in how individuals interpret and engage with their experiences. Transformative learning aims to make problematic frames of reference more reliable by fostering more justified beliefs and interpretations in adulthood. Over time, the transformed perspective itself can become a new frame of reference that shapes future meaning-making.

The two essential elements of transformative learning are critical reflection and reflective discourse (Mezirow, 2012). First, it is important to become critically aware of the hidden assumptions and expectations we hold and those of others. This involves critically reflecting on whether the underlying assumptions or premises that support these beliefs are valid. Also, reflective discourse helps clarify understanding by drawing on collective experiences. Mezirow (2000, 2012) contends 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.

Mezirow (2012) explains that transformative learning occurs when the learner consciously chooses to act on reflective insight, whether immediately, later, or by reaffirming an existing approach. True transformation requires not only willingness or recognition of change but also the capacity for meaningful action.

2.4.3 International Students and Transformative Learning

Literature suggests that exposure to a new culture holds “transformative potential” (Brown, 2009, p. 504), making cross-cultural experiences significant settings for transformative learning (Taylor, 1994). For international students, entering a different cultural context can pose unfamiliar challenges that prompt them to question long-held frames of reference (Nada et al., 2018), thus creating opportunities for transformation.

Thus, Mezirow’s (1978, 1991, 2012) TLT offers a useful framework for studying this process (Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Taylor, 1994), as it captures the identity shifts and meaning-making involved in studying abroad (Liu, 2023; Nada et al., 2018; Ritz, 2011; Ruddock & Turner, 2007). Transformative learning in this context emphasizes how international students adapt and grow during cross-cultural transitions, rather than focusing solely on academic content (Kegan, 2000; Nada et al., 2018; Vande Berg, 2007). Additionally, research shows that intercultural transformation involves not only gaining new knowledge and skills but also undergoing personal and identity development (Kadianaki et al., 2015; Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Nada et al., 2018).

Critics argue that Mezirow’s (2012) theory views transformation mainly as an individual process focused on personal negotiation and action, reflecting Western adult education interests (Clark & Wilson, 1991). Additionally, TLT may insufficiently address diverse cultural factors, neglecting contexts where collective or alternative

forms of understanding and decision-making are common (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012; Merriam & Ntseane, 2008; Taylor, 2000). Therefore, a concern for my research is that TLT may overlook the diverse environmental factors that contribute to and shape the transformative learning experiences of Chinese international students in the UK.

3 A Multilayered Theoretical Frameworks

For this research, a multilayered theoretical framework on learning experiences was employed to inform research questions and analyze the data, as shown in Fig. 2. Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) served as the foundational layer, with Dewey's (1916, 1934, 1938) theory of experience and Mezirow's (1991, 2000, 2012) TLT as the second and third layers. While social constructivism provided a general epistemological foundation for understanding the participants' learning processes within different sociocultural contexts, Dewey's theories helped conceptualize experience, particularly how continuous interaction with the (external) environment influences participants' development across cultural settings. Mezirow's TLT offered a more detailed framework for analyzing the processes through which individual participants interpret and reflect on their prior experiences to achieve transformation in a new environment. These additional layers, grounded in social constructivism, provide two complementary lenses for exploring international students' cross-cultural transition experiences from both external and internal perspectives.

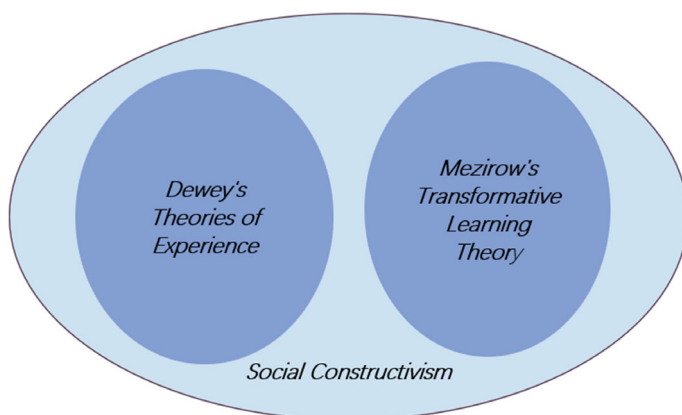


Fig. 2 A multilayered theoretical framework on learning experiences

3.1 *Social Constructivism*

Social constructivist theories, as the foundational layer of the theoretical framework, provided a foundational definition of the research objective, which concerned the learning experiences in a different sociocultural environment, both internally and externally. Internally, the framework defines the learning process as the construction of knowledge through the interpretation of experiences. Externally, it emphasizes the importance of interaction with the sociocultural context. This helped to inform the main research questions that explore Chinese international students' experiences during a specific period involving environmental change.

Specifically, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development was used to determine the potential elements influencing cross-cultural transition experiences, particularly the role of cultural tools and dialogue with MKOs in constructing knowledge. These elements helped identify specific factors, such as language proficiency, major, and interpersonal relationships, which shaped the participants' learning experiences in different cultural environments. They were critical in understanding the participants' challenges and identifying the factors contributing to these challenges within a different sociocultural context, thereby addressing the first sub-question, which explores the potential factors underlying these challenges.

Furthermore, this layer of the framework provided the epistemological foundation for analyzing the collected data. It aligned with the research's ontological position (constructionism) and epistemological position (interpretivism), as both focus on the collaborative nature of learning.

3.2 *Dewey's Theory of Experience*

Dewey's (1934) view of experience as beginning with resistance underscores the importance of examining the challenges Chinese international students encounter during their transition. This perspective informed the development of the first sub-question, which focused on international students' experiences of challenges during cross-cultural transition. Furthermore, Dewey's (1934) theory of experience and the concept of educative experience inspired the third sub-question, which aimed to explore the development of experiences by examining how participants' different actions and decisions could impact their development during cross-cultural transition.

Meanwhile, this second layer of the framework offered a valuable philosophical perspective for conceptualizing participants' experiences. Dewey's (1916, 1934) concept of the unity of experience, from impulse to completion, was beneficial to interpret the entire process of the experiences. It also offered a lens for understanding how different aspects of an experience interconnect, enabling a deeper exploration of participants' experiences.

Moreover, Dewey's (1934) emphasis on personal growth through continuity and interaction offered both a longitudinal and lateral perspective for analyzing cross-cultural experiences. 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. It 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.

3.3 Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow's (1991, 2000) view of learning as a process of interpreting experience informed me of my decision to explore more deeply how participants made sense of their learning journeys and the factors that shaped them. This perspective guided the development of the second sub-question, which focuses on how Chinese international students interpret their own learning experiences and the factors influencing these experiences. Alongside Dewey's theories, Mezirow's (2012) concept of transformative learning, which emphasizes learning as a reflective process rooted in past and present experiences within complex social, cultural, and interpersonal contexts, prompted a further line of inquiry into whether varied cross-cultural transition experiences and their interpretations might lead to different forms of reflective action, thereby influencing students' development in UK universities. This reflection informed the third sub-question, which investigates the development of their cross-cultural transitions through a longitudinal research design.

Mezirow's (1978, 1991, 2012) TLT served as the third layer of the theoretical framework, providing an empirical and detailed framework for explaining adult learning processes. TLT was used to understand, interpret, and analyze 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, TLT provided a more practical and empirical framework than Dewey's more philosophical approach, conceptualizing participants' learning in different cultural settings as a process of transformation. For example, the 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, this framework enabled an examination of participants' learning experiences over a 12-month period, based on different phases of transformation. It also provided a clear understanding of the personal cognitive process, while sociocultural

theory focused on how environmental factors influenced the participants' learning experiences. 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.

3.4 The Researcher's Positionality

The choice of this multilayered theoretical framework also reflects my positionality as a transient insider (Roberts, 2018), a flexible stance that became clearer during the interview and data analysis stages. My role shifted depending on the context: as an insider when listening to participants' stories as a fellow international student, and as an outsider when offering explanations or interpretations. This duality extended into data analysis, where I alternated between outsider interpretation and insider empathy. The framework supports this dual role by emphasizing lived experience, reflection, and meaning-making as central to learning. Dewey's view of learning through experience and Mezirow's focus on transformative reflection align with my journey as both a former international student and an educator-researcher. These theories guide my interpretation of participants' narratives while encouraging reflexivity about how my own experiences shape the research, creating alignment between the study's epistemological grounding and my situated perspective.

4 Conclusions

The multilayered theoretical framework aligned with the study's research paradigm. Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) provided the epistemological grounding by conceptualizing learning as socially constructed through interaction between individuals and their environment. Dewey's (1916, 1934, 1938) theory offered a second layer by emphasizing the nature and quality of experience as central to learning and growth. Mezirow's (1978, 1991, 2012) TLT added a third layer, framing learning as a transformative process involving critical reflection, personal agency, and identity development over time.

The framework was also central to both informing the research questions and situating the study within a more developmental rather than deficit-focused perspective. Specifically, it supports the exploration of international students' experiences in UK universities through a longitudinal lens, offering a richer understanding of their learning and growth, rather than viewing their journey simply as a matter of cultural adjustment. Building on this foundation, the theoretical framework also helped shape the research's sub-questions, which probe more deeply into students' lived challenges, the contextual and personal factors influencing their experiences, the ways in which they make meaning of these experiences, and how their interpretations and development unfold over time.

Finally, this theoretical framework also reflects the researcher's own positionality as a transient insider, which supports a more nuanced and critically engaged interpretation of participants' narratives.

In addition, the chosen theoretical framework served as a meaningful lens for reflecting on my own experiences. Throughout this study, I not only collected and analyzed data but also developed a deeper understanding of myself. This process of self-awareness and reflection fostered transformative learning and personal growth. With no prior background in social sciences or related research, understanding theoretical frameworks was initially challenging. My interpretations often drew on everyday experiences, such as observing my children's cognitive development. When analyzing participants' experiences, I found parallels with my children's swimming lessons, which deepened my engagement and understanding. This reflection aligns with Dewey's (1934, 1938) concepts of continuity and interaction in educative experiences, illustrating how my Ph.D. journey became an educative process that promoted growth.

This journey also transformed my role as the mother of two British-born Chinese children. I shifted from being a "mother with all the answers" to embracing the role of a "learner," developing openness to diverse perspectives in a different cultural context. This change deepened my relationship with my children, as we became each other's MKO in a mutual learning process. This reciprocal relationship enriched both their development and my own understanding, fostering shared growth within a collaborative learning environment.

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