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Multi-cultural Learning Experiences of Chinese-background Students at two Australian Universities

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Abstract:

Recently, the number of international students studying in Australia is increasing dramatically, due to the economic and intercultural globalisation, and Chinese-background students are a main source of international students in Australia (AEI, 2009). As Chinese-background students come from an educational background, which is markedly different from those in Australia, they experience a range of challenges and problems in their learning. Hence, Chinese-background students have to make adjustments and adapt different coping strategies to overcome these language and cultural difficulties. This study involved fifty-seven students, with a Chinese-background, from two academic institutions in Australia. It has explored the questions of what the perceptions are of these Chinese-background students, and what adjustments have been made to adapt the new learning environment. The data gathered for this study were drawn from semi-structured interviews and surveys conducted at two Australian universities. The findings of this study appeared to confirm that most of these Chinese-background students are indeed successfully implementing coping strategies to succeed despite the obstacles faced, and some support strategies are preferred and expected in their learning. The findings contributed to understanding Chinese-background students' cultural and educational needs, which can inform and improve the support strategies given to future students.

1.0 Introduction

Australia, due to its high educational reputation and advanced educational system, has always been attracting a great number of international students. In recent years, that number of international students studying in Australia has increased dramatically, due to economic development and globalization. Chinese-background students have always been the main source of international students (AEI, 2009) in Australia.

These Chinese-background students bring to Australian education institutions significant multi-cultural experiences. However, due to the cultural and language differences between their own countries and the host country, they confront challenges and difficulties in their learning. Only the students, who can adjust to the environment rapidly, and learn the rules and skills fast, are able to cope academically and socially, and to complete their respective courses successfully (Barker, Child, Gallios, Jones, & Callen, 1991; Sawir, 2005). This study examined what challenges Chinese-background students confronted in their study at tertiary education institutions, and what

adjustments were made to adapt the new academic environments.

This study involved the participation of fifty-seven Chinese-background students, from mainland of China, Hong Kong and Malaysia. These students are currently studying at two Australian universities. Data were gathered from surveys and semi-structured interviews, intends to study on the difficulties and concerns faced by these Chinese-background students, and efforts and adjustments made by them. The findings of the research it is believed can better assist current and future Chinese-background students, as well as provide information for educators in identifying effective and appropriate support strategies to maximise students' academic potential.

2.0 Literature review

Official records, from the Australian Education International (AEI, 2009), show that there were 543,898 enrolments by full-fee paying international students in Australia on a student visa in 2008 (AEI, 2009). However, 79.1% of these international student enrolments came from the Asian group, with the top three nationalities as China (23.4%), India (17.8%) and Republic of Korea (6.5%). In other words, Chinese-background students have been the largest group of international students during the last few years. A Chinese-background, in this research, is considered as being of Chinese nationality or Chinese ethnicity, or speaks Chinese as one's native language (Barron & Arcodia, 2002).

The Chinese-background students experience challenges in their study due to the cultural differences between Australia and their home countries. Although Australia is a multi-cultural country, the mainstream culture is western culture. Based on the previous research, Furnham and Bochner (1982) develop the *cultural distance theories* and find that the greater distance between home culture and host culture, the more cultural difficulty overseas students experience. However, Australian and Asian cultures tend to fall at opposite ends of each dimension, with great distinction in individualism/collectivism dimension (Thomason, Rosenthal, & Russell, 2006). Hence, it is an enormous challenge for Asian students to adjust themselves and adapt to the new environment, due to the tremendous cultural differences.

Academic problems and social problems are the two main areas usually confronted by international students. In terms of academic problems, language barrier is the most prevalent and significant problem for most overseas students (Mori, 2000), especially for Asian students, who often have little experience in English in their home countries (Liu, 2001). The language barrier has direct adverse effect on the academic performance of students (Mori, 2000). Inadequate English language skills usually decrease students' ability to understand lecture, to take notes, to complete assignments and tests, and to communicate with other students and teachers in classes (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986).

Apart from the English language barrier, academic language, educational methodologies, prior academic preparation and curriculum content are also the most salient problems international students would confront. When learning and teaching styles, also named educational methodologies in host country, conflict with previous educational experiences, it will take a long

time for overseas students to adapt to the new academic environments. For example, active classroom participation is highly encouraged in most Australian universities, especial in tutorials, but most Asian students tend to be quiet in their classrooms and take notes to be memorised in preparation for tests and exams (Mori, 2000). Prior academic preparation and curriculum content are also important factors, which can influent international students' learning in new academic phrases. In either case, the problems would be produced by the gap between prior academic background and the curriculum of foreign educational program (Arthur, 2004). Students would feel isolated when feel they are being excluded from the classroom and some students even feel like they do not belong to the local academic context (Arthur, 2004).

Besides academic problems, international students would face severe social problems in the process of cultural transition. Away from home countries, families and cultural familiarity in which they grow up, international students feel helpless, anxious and homesick. Some may even encounter discrimination and racism due to shift from being members of the majority race to minority race. These social problems can also influence international students' academic progress.

In response to the problems above, a number of researches have been conducted in relation to coping strategies to reduce stress and increase satisfactory of international students. Coping strategies include two major types: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Folkmen & Lazarus, 1985). Problem-focused coping, which means doing something to change the situation that causes the distress, is more frequently used to deal with some sources of stress that are considered by the person as changeable than with those considered as unchangeable, such as low language level and low communicative competence (Folkmen & Lazarus, 1985). The other coping strategy is emotion-focused coping, which refers to regulation of distressing emotions (Folkmen & Lazarus, 1985).

Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) list four following categories of coping strategies:

- Approach, which includes active coping, planning and suppression of competing activities.
- Avoidance, which includes behavioural disengagement, denial and venting of emotions.
- Acceptance, which includes acceptance and restraint coping strategies.
- Social support, which means seeking emotional and instrumental support.

These four influential factors are seen as critical for all international students' learning. The category 'Approach' is similar to Folkmen and Lazarus's (1985) problem-focused coping strategy; it is used by most international students, including Chinese-background students, when facing difficulties and challenges in their learning. However, the other three categories, Avoidance, Acceptance and Social support are related to both (Folkmen & Lazarus, 1985) problem-focused coping strategy and emotion-focused coping strategy. This study examined how the Chinese students, who were studying at two universities in Australia, adopted these coping strategies to overcome difficulties in their study.

3.0 Research aim and questions

This study aimed at discovering what coping strategies were used by the Chinese-background

students studying at two Australian academic institutions. This research focused on the following four questions:

- What are the views of Chinese-background students on the significance of English language abilities in their learning and academic achievement?
- What are the views of Chinese-background students on the influences of cultural differences in their study at university and daily lives?
- What coping strategies are being used or have been used by these Chinese-background students in terms of English for academic purpose?
- What are the views of Chinese-background students on the role of Universities in assisting them with their study? The focus will be on the following aspects: lectures, tutorials, assignments, and tests.

4.0 Methodology

This research used both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative method of data gathering is in the form of a questionnaire, and the qualitative method consists of a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire in this study included questions formatted to a Likert scale (Wolf, 1997). The strength of respondents' feeling for each statement was identified on a five abbreviation scale, i.e., SDA=Strongly Disagree; DA=Disagree; NS=Not Sure; A=Agree; SA=Strongly Agree. The questions assess how Chinese-background students self-report their learning experiences and challenges faced in their study at university. The questions also consider the Chinese-background students' views on the significance of English language, and the role of universities and faculties in assisting their study.

In addition to the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with participants were also conducted by the researcher to further support the data collection. The semi-structured interviews allowed for some flexibility on the part of the respondent (Burns, 2000). Similar to questionnaires, the semi-structured interviews asked questions in searching for patterns in the data. However, the interviews collect explanatory information, which permits a deep understanding of Chinese-background students' learning difficulties and the role of universities in their study. The interview questions were prepared in advance to give a degree of coherence to the themes emerged from the responds to the questionnaires and the elements mentioned by relevant literatures. The interviewer asked follow-up questions and elaborated based on the participants' input.

5.0 Findings

The data collected through survey questions were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software. Information gathered from semi-structured interviews were analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2003, 2006) and a three-step coding approach, which is including open, axial and selective coding process (Sarantakos, 2005).

5.1 Questionnaires

There are 50 questions in the questionnaire. The first 11 questions (Q1 to Q11) are biographical information of participants and Q12 to Q50 are questions about learning experiences of Chinese-

background students. These questions can be divided into four categories as follows:

- Q12-Q17 investigate the significance of English language in the Chinese-background students' learning and academic achievement;
- Q18-Q24 investigate the influence of cultural difference in Chinese-background students' learning;
- Q25-Q44 focus on the adjustment made by Chinese-background students to overcome the difficulties;
- Q45-Q50 deal with the role of support strategies from faculties and universities.

Participants' response to these four categories were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software. The strength of respondents' feelings for each category is identified in tables.

5.1.1. English language aspect

In this questionnaire, the first six questions are an investigation of the significance of English in Chinese-background students' study. The table below is the participants' responses to the first six questions:

Table 1
English Language

Questions	Strong Disagree		Disagree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree		Mean
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	
Q12							12	24%	38	76%	4.76
Q13	1	2%	1	2%	3	6%	23	46%	22	44%	4.28
Q14			5	10%	3	6%	21	42%	21	42%	4.16
Q15	2	4%	15	30%	8	16%	16	32%	9	18%	3.30
Q16					5	10%	23	46%	22	44%	4.34
Q17	1	2%	10	20%	12	24%	21	42%	6	12%	3.42
Total	4		31		31		116		118		

According to the table above, all of the fifty seven participants agreed that English was essential in their study, and 90% participants considered that their academic achievement was greatly influenced by their English ability. However, majority of Chinese-background students had difficult in using English language. The data shows that more than 80% participants had difficulty in expressing their opinion in English and half of them could not fully understand the lecturers' words in the lecture. Also, due to limitation of English ability, over 50% Chinese-background students considered that the first six months were the hardest period for their study. Hence, 90% students believed that it is important to seek ways to improve their English skills. In sum, it is apparent that most students agreed that English language skills were significant in their study and academic achievement.

5.1.2 Cultural aspect

Q18 to Q24 are the questions regarding the influence of cultural differences on Chinese-background students' learning and academic achievement. The table below is the participants' responses to these seven questions:

Table 2

Culture Aspect

Questions	Strong Disagree		Disagree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree		Mean
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	
Q18	2	4%	9	18%	7	14%	16	32%	16	32%	3.70
Q19	6	12%	9	18%	9	18%	15	30%	11	22%	3.32
Q20	5	10%	13	26%	13	26%	19	38%			2.92
Q21	4	8%	20	40%	11	22%	15	30%			2.74
Q22	6	12%	17	34%	5	10%	20	40%	2	4%	2.90
Q23	3	6%	14	28%	17	34%	12	24%	4	8%	3.00
Q24	5	10%	14	28%	15	30%	13	26%	3	6%	2.90
Total	24		72		55		83		25		

The table above shows that due to the different cultural background, Chinese-background students had different learning and teaching styles in host countries from those experienced in Australia. According to the data, more than half of the Chinese-background students acknowledged that there was no tutorial in their home countries (Q19), and about 65% Chinese students believed that it is a good behaviour to keep quiet in the classroom (Q18). Besides, less than 40% Chinese students often exchanged their ideas with teachers and other fellow students (Q20), and only 30% students frequently participated group discussion when they were in their home countries (Q21). Moreover, 44% students did not like to express their opinion in classes (Q22). All these data showed that due to different cultural characteristics reflected in education, most of the Chinese-background students inclined to keep quiet and reserve their opinions, which was in the direction of away from western educational characteristics, such as positivity, involvement and creation. The means of the last two questions is or tend to the middle, it means that most of the Chinese-background students hold neutral attitude to the relationship between education and culture.

5.1.3 Adjustments

Q25 to Q44 are the questions regarding adjustments made by the Chinese-background students to overcome the difficulties and challenges. The results are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3

Adjustments

Question	Strong Disagree		Disagree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree		Mean
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	
Q25	5	10%	11	22%	11	22%	18	36%	5	10%	3.14
Q26	6	12%	17	34%	10	20%	16	32%	1	2%	2.78

Q27	2	4%	10	20%	7	14%	28	56%	3	6%	3.40
Q28	1	2%	3	6%	7	14%	30	60%	9	18%	3.86
Q29	2	4%	16	32%	10	20%	19	38%	3	6%	3.10
Q30			1	2%	7	14%	30	60%	12	24%	4.06
Q31			4	8%	10	20%	24	48%	12	24%	3.88
Q32			7	14%	10	20%	27	54%	6	12%	3.64
Q33			3	6%	8	16%	31	62%	8	16%	3.88
Q34	4	8%	14	28%	10	20%	19	38%	3	6%	3.06
Q35	4	8%	20	40%	7	14%	14	28%	5	10%	2.92
Q36	1	2%	4	8%	14	28%	26	52%	5	10%	3.60
Q37	1	2%	3	6%	15	30%	24	48%	7	14%	3.66
Q38			3	6%	4	8%	26	52%	17	34%	4.14
Q39			7	14%	11	22%	24	48%	8	16%	3.66
Q40			4	8%	6	12%	32	64%	8	16%	3.88
Q41			1	2%	4	8%	34	68%	11	22%	4.10
Q42			2	4%	4	8%	28	56%	16	32%	4.16
Q43	6	12%	20	40%	18	36%	6	12%			2.48
Q44	5	10%	10	20%	11	22%	23	46%	1	2%	3.10
Total	37		160		184		479		140		

According to the Table above, most of the Chinese-background students held a positive attitude toward their study and tried to adjust themselves to the new academic environment. For example, in order to understand the lecture better, nearly half of the participants preferred the front seats of lecture theaters (Q25). Over 60% students often communicated with their fellow students to improve their learning (Q27). Although 78% of Chinese-background students considered tutorial as important (Q28), only 36% tended to talk as much as possible in group discussion during the tutorials (Q29).

It can also be seen from Table X that most of the Chinese-background students attached greatly importance to giving presentation. 84% participants would prepare presentation as fully as possible (Q30), and more than 70% of them tried to practice as many times as they could before formal presentations (Q31). Although only 12% Chinese-background students would study more than eight hours a day, nearly half of students would try to catch up during weekend (Q43-44). In regard to assignments, they also tried to seek help from lecturers (66%) and other fellow students (78%) when they had problems with their assignments (Q32-33). Also, approximately 44%-48% Chinese-background students would ask anybody else to check their assignments before submission (Q34-35). During writing assignments, 62%, 62% and 86% of the participants tried to get information from books, journals and internet (Q36-38). In order to get good results in tests or final examination, 90% Chinese-background students tried to prepare as fully as possible (Q41), and 88% would spend more time to study before tests or final examination (Q42). The data also shows that nearly 65% students considered the online learning system at universities was quite useful to their study.

5.1.4 Support from universities

Q45 to Q50 investigate the role of support from faculty and university. The Chinese-background students' responses to these questions are illustrated in Table 4 below:

Table 4
Support from Universities

Questions	Strong Disagree		Disagree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree		Mean
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	
Q45	1	2%	10	20%	13	26%	24	48%	2	4%	3.32
Q46	1	2%	15	30%	16	32%	18	36%			3.02
Q47			3	6%	14	28%	28	56%	5	10%	3.70
Q48	1	2%	8	16%	14	28%	19	38%	8	16%	3.50
Q49	2	4%	5	10%	16	32%	26	52%	1	2%	3.38
Q50			3	6%	8	16%	26	52%	13	26%	3.98
Total	5		44		81		141		29		

The table above shows that more than 50% Chinese-background students got extra help from their teachers (Q45), and 36% of them agreed that other administration staff were also helpful to their study (Q46). Also, 54% students believed the university tried its best to help their study (Q49). Nearly 80% of them considered that they needed extra language support on their assignment and tests (Q50). Besides, over 65% participants agreed that their teachers treat them fairly (Q47) and 54% of them considered that their teacher treat them equally to local students (Q48). In sum, most of the Chinese-background students took a positive view of support from university.

5.2 Discussion of interviews

The textual data collected from semi-structured interviews were interpreted into five core categories as shown below:

- influences on Chinese-background students' study;
- influences of English language skills;
- cultural influences on Chinese-background students' learning;
- excitement gained by Chinese-background students;
- seeking support.

In the interviews, the Chinese-background students gave some detailed information about their learning experiences, which is a strong support of the findings gained from the questionnaires. For example, both positive and negative influences on their study were discussed by the Chinese-background students. The importance of English language skills, which were emphasised by most of these students, appeared as the other category that has the most responses. Apart from the English language aspect, the participants expressed that cultural differences also had been a challenge in their study in Australia. These categories support Furnham and Bochner's (1982) cultural distance theory, and Mori's literature (2000), which emphasise the great influences of language and cultural differences on international students' learning experiences.

In addition, excitement gained were also mentioned by the Chinese-background students, some of them were more excited about finishing learning tasks, however, the other ones mentioned getting to know about the local environment was more exciting. Last but not least, support from universities was discussed by most of the Chinese-background students. Only few of them mentioned that they believed on overcoming difficulties by themselves, however, the others thought that universities' support strategies played an important role. This last category is an evidence of Carver, Scheier and Weintraub's (1989) theory about the Approach Coping Strategies, which argue that some students would approach active coping strategies like planning and asking questions, and social support strategy, which argues that some students would ask for support to overcome difficulties faced.

6.0 Conclusion

Chinese-background students have always been a main source of overseas students in Australia. Due to the great cultural and language differences between home countries and the host country, Chinese-background students would confront problems and challenge in their learning experiences. This study, by the means of qualitative analysis of data from two Australian universities, provides insights into the lives of Chinese-background students in this new academic context from four aspects: language competency, cultural differences, self-adjustment and social supports. The findings showed that majority of Chinese-background students would encounter various cultural barriers in language and academy, but most of them are willing to adopt effective strategies, including self-adjustment and looking for support from university to overcome these difficulties. This study intends to provide information to current and future Chinese-background students, as well as contributes for educators to understanding Chinese-background students' cultural and educational needs so as to provide more effective support for Chinese-background students.

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