Research on the challenges and influencing factors of language adaptation for Malaysian international students

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Abstract. As China has moved to the era of degree involution, many students have chosen to go abroad to pursue further study because of the cost-effective tuition fee and the excellent educational resources. Malaysia has become a preferred option for many students. According to Education Malaysia Global Services (2025) data, Chinese students studying abroad have emerged as Malaysia's most significant international student population. And the adaptation for international students is a hot topic among scholars. This study examines the challenges and factors affecting adaptation for Chinese international students in Malaysia. It addresses language barriers and cultural adaptation, analyzes influencing factors, and proposes practical solutions. Meanwhile, the main research objective will be those oversea students studying in Malaysia who came from China, this study will provide valuable and consultable reference for students who will pursue study in Malaysia and Chinese students studying in Malaysia who is suffering adaption anxiety. Hopefully, this study will also attract attention to the issue of overseas students' mental health and welfare. The study shows that the language barrier is still the main factor, and students can release their stress by consolidating their language foundation, improving their self-learning ability, broadening their social circle and so on.

Keywords: Cross-cultural international students, international students' language adaptation, second language anxiety, adapt to the English-speaking environment

1. Introduction

With comprehensive globalisation and increased national income, studying overseas has become a common choice among Chinese students [1]. Malaysia suits Chinese students because of its budget-friendly tuition fees and valuable opportunities. Based on the figures from the 2025 Blue Book on Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2025), it is estimated that around 220,000 Chinese international students will be admitted in 2025, with Malaysia projected to accept 15,000 Chinese international students [2].

Although students have prepared for their overseas study in advance, they will still face some hurdles. Scholars have agreed that adaptation to the new cultural environment is a significant issue for international students.

1.1. Existing academic gap

As mentioned above, China has become Malaysian universities' largest source country of international students [1]. However, a few studies still used Chinese international students as the sample. The statistics indicate that only 6 articles could be retrieved through Google Scholar and China National Knowledge Infrastructure, which used Chinese international students as the sample. In addition, only 3 studies have provided practical solutions. This paper will use Google Scholar and CNKI as retrieval tools to summarize previous experiences and research, mainly focus on the challenges and influencing factors of language adaptation for international students in Malaysia and then provide some practical solutions to adapt to the new cultural environment as soon as possible, which can give some beneficial references for those Chinese students who will purse further study in Malaysia or who are suffering cross-cultural adaption anxiety.

2. Challenges confronted by Chinese international students

2.1. Language barriers second-language anxiety in four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)

When those students enter an environment with an unknown culture, they will likely encounter stress and challenges because they have to cope with two cultures concurrently. It is common to think that the language barrier is a significant hurdle for overseas students. And these phenomena are usually reflected in four aspects: listening, speaking, reading and writing [3].

2.1.1. Listening

Regarding listening, international students studying in Malaysia will feel complex and confused; Chinese students are no exception. It is because Manglish has unique pronunciation and expression habits. For example, because of the influence of the native Malay language, the vowel/i :/ and / i / in Bre are often pronounced as / i/, such as beat-bit, heed-hid, which may cause ambiguity and misunderstanding [4]. They usually can not capture information accurately, which leads to listening anxiety.

2.1.2. Speaking

Anxiety in English communication can be debilitating, affecting students' adaptation to the target environment and ultimately their achievement of educational goals [5]. Drawing upon the silent period hypothesis [6], it is plausible that Chinese international students may exhibit reticence in spoken English upon commencing their studies in Malaysia. They are afraid of making grammatical mistakes in conversations, worried that their non-standard pronunciation will be mocked, or lack sufficient language material accumulation, thus daring not to take the initiative to speak.

2.1.3. Reading

Many the academic literature and teaching materials contain a lot of professional vocabulary and complex sentence structures. Taking financial textbooks and literature as examples, some professional terms such as "aboriginal cost" and "recapitalise" are beyond international students' reading ability. According to the cognitive load theory [7], excessive information can lead to cognitive overload, thus triggering reading anxiety.

2.1.4. Writing

For foreign language learners, constructing a comprehensive and coherent written text is challenging [8]. So, as a second language learner, Chinese international students will also experience anxiety. Many scholars have said writing has been regarded as a generative skill and a challenging process [9]. Moreover, when international students have to finish an academic writing, they should adhere to special logical structures and formatting norms (such as citation formats). It is necessary to avoid the influence of mother tongue thinking, which has posed difficulties in content organisation, accuracy and coherence of language expression for them.

2.2. Culture adaptation issues

Based on culture adaptation theory, every new arrival, including immigrants and refugees, should build and sustain a stable functional relationship with the host environment. So when international students, defined as foreign sojourners who study abroad provisionally, move to a new cultural environment, they will also confront the culture adaptation issue.

2.2.1. Barriers to social integration: building relationships with local people

When international students arrive in a new environment, their existing interpersonal relationships are influenced by distance. For instance, communication and contact with relatives and friends will decrease; they also have to establish their new relationship networks by themselves. However, building new relationships and integrating into society is an enormous challenge for international students because of the different cultural backgrounds, language abilities and living habits, which may increase the psychological pressure on international students [10].

2.2.2. Conflicts in values and identity construction

A person's identity can also be described as their personal beliefs regarding their relationship with social groups and the ways they convey that connection [11]. Values are people's concepts about the importance of things and are the criteria for evaluating and choosing objects based on the object's significance to the subject. As an Islamic country, Malaysia has a unique value and cultural system significantly different from China's. Students may easily feel unfamiliar with and confused about some local Malaysian values when communicating with local people, affecting their identity construction. For example, they may experience conflicts between the identities of "Chinese", "atheist or Buddhist" and "Malaysian", "Muslim". International students, while experiencing the allure of diverse cultures, are susceptible to the detrimental influences of the host country's cultural milieu, potentially resulting in skewed value systems and impeded personal growth.

3. Influencing factors

3.1. Environmental factors: the language environment in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country. Malays, Chinese, and Indians are the three main ethnic groups with their own languages and dialects. Based on the information from English in Malaysia [12]. Take Malaysians as an example, Most Malaysians who can speak English utilize a local variant in casual settings and when interacting with fellow Malaysians. A more prevalent linguistic form, patterned after standard British or American English, is applied in official scenarios and when engaging with non-natives. That complex linguistic environment is a double-edged sword for international students. On the one hand, a multi-language environment can provide a valuable opportunity for international students to practice and improve their language. However, frequent code-switching may hinder overseas students from learning and grasping standard English [13].

3.2. Social contacts and friendship

After meticulous research, some current studies found that social contact(interaction) significantly influences international students' experience and adaptation to the host country's life and studies [14]. Chinese international students' social contacts include not only fellow students from the same country and friends back home, but also daily communication with residents, indigenous teachers and classmates. Those contacts directly affected their understanding of local culture and adaption to life in Malaysia. According to a study held by [15], interacting with international students from other countries was significant beyond academic contexts; they also predicted international students' life satisfaction in the host country and their sociocultural adaptation.

3.3. Individual factors

3.3.1. Self-efficiency

Self-efficiency, proposed by psychologist Albert Bandura refers to an individual's speculation and judgment about their ability to complete a certain behavior, that is," an individual's belief in their own ability to accomplish specific task or achieve goals. Another formulation of self-efficacy, offered more broadly, describes it as an individual's enduring capacity to operate effectively amid diverse stressful situations [16]. So it is easy to conclude that self-efficacy plays an analogous role in international students' sociocultural adjustment. So, if students believe they can better integrate into the host community, they will likely achieve greater sociocultural adaptation. Moreover, several scholars have noted that individuals with high self-efficacy tend to be goal-oriented, conscientious, resilient, and adaptable. When Chinese international students have low self-efficacy, they will find it more challenging to adapt to the culture and social environment of the host country [17].

3.3.2. Personality traits

Personality traits shape individuals' adaptation to foreign environments, particularly relevant to their approaches to managing stress and navigating challenges. Based on Big Five personality traits [18], international students who are outgoing, open-minded, emotionally stable and friendly tend to take the initiative to interact with others to seek help, get answers to questions, or alleviate loneliness. Furthermore, they exhibit heightened motivation and perseverance in language learning, social assimilation, and cultural acclimation; nevertheless, introverted students might display increased reticence in initiating interpersonal exchanges. They might prefer to solve problems independently, but they may miss out on opportunities for communication and support. Moreover, if students have erratic moods, they tend to feel frustrated and anxious when they experience academic pressure and adaption difficulties.

3.3.3. Personal prior tour experience

As globalization progresses, an increasing number of international students are participating in educational excursions. According to Searle and Ward, pre-arrival tour experience is a crucial factor in students' adaptation. International students can enhance their understanding of the host country and improve their adaptive capacity through pre-travel study tours [19].

4. Practical solutions

4.1. Improve individuals' capacity for self-cultivation: language proficiency

International students need to recognize their language proficiency and cross-cultural ability deficiencies, and then take some initiatives spontaneously. In terms of language learning, they should formulate a reasonable study plan to sharpen their English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. First, utilize fragmented time efficiently. For example, listening to local Malaysian radio, watching TV programs, eating, exercising, etc. Second, about speaking, grab all chances to practice oral English, engage actively in class interactions, communicate with teachers and peers, and participate enthusiastically in social activities in daily life. Individuals should proactively initiate interactions with residents while dining out or in routine shopping activities. Such practices, including requesting recommendations or engaging in informal conversations, can facilitate their adaptation to the cadence of natural verbal exchanges. Thirdly, Emphasis should be placed on accumulating knowledge to lay a solid foundation. Regarding reading, original English works are a significant instrument for accumulating vocabulary and linguistic expressions. Daily attention may also be directed to signboards and advertising content.

4.2. Integrate and maintain a rational balance with the host culture

Concerning culture integration, overseas students should promote a deeper understanding of Malaysia's cultural practices, traditions and values by learning the cultural background, interacting with local people, and experiencing different customs. Uphold an open mindset and embrace cultural diversity. Moreover, the most significant thing is respecting cultural taboos. To illustrate, when entering a Malay family or a mosque, visitors should take off their shoes; touching a Malay's head is also regarded as an impolite behavior. Besides respecting cultural taboos, international students should balance cultural adaptation and self-identity. While integrating into Malaysian cultural groups, there is no need to force oneself into complete assimilation; retaining one's cultural characteristics can facilitate integration into a foreign culture.

4.3. Social support seeking

The pursuit of social support is widely acknowledged as a viable strategy for international students to mitigate acculturative stress and enhance their cross-cultural adaptation outcomes. Additionally, International students typically sustain two discrete support networks: a well-entrenched one within their country of origin and an emergent counterpart in their host nation [20],While maintaining relationships with relatives and friends in China, the most paramount thing is to broaden their social circle actively and communicate promptly when encountering academic, psychological, or life problems, as well as seek help.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on second language acquisition and cross-cultural adaptation theories, this study theoretically analyzes the difficulties, challenges, and influencing factors encountered by Malaysian international students pre- and during their study abroad, and puts forward corresponding solutions. The results show that language hurdles and cultural adaption problems are the main obstacles to their adaptation, with personality, self-efficacy, and personal background all playing a role. In response, solutions are proposed from three dimensions: personal enhancement, integration into the host culture, and access to social support. The study is not without its limitations. Its reliance on theoretical analysis, absent the corroboration of empirical data, necessitates further substantiation to bolster its persuasiveness. To confirm the accuracy of the theoretical analysis and suggested fixes, future studies may use an empirical approach, gathering and combining data on the language acquisition and cultural adjustment of Malaysian international students.

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