The Chaotic Academic Integration for Chinese International Students in Australia

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Abstract

There is a cultural distance between Australian and Chinese sociocultural practices, especially academic practices, which could be problematic for Chinese international students studying in Australia. This situation presents affective and cognitive challenges in transitioning from a familiar Chinese context to an unfamiliar Australian academic environment which is akin to academic "culture" shock. This paper will use a mixed methods approach, through the combination of two back-to-back studies, to explore issues Chinese students faced during the initial phases of their academic sojourn in Australia. Our findings suggest that a combination of language competency deficit coupled with unfamiliarity with academic practices had caused initial problems with Chinese international students' academic adjustment in an Australian setting. This problem was exacerbated by poor intercultural awareness and empathy from Australian educators to adjust their teaching practices in such an intercultural dynamic.

Keywords: academic adjustment, Australian universities, Chinese students, critical thinking, language competency, time management

1. Introduction

A confronting issue for Chinese students is changing their learning styles from the Chinese to Western academic paradigms. An overview of English Language Teaching (ELT) in China in the mid-1990s (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) provided insights for teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a Chinese context, where there was a high focus on grammar drills, in a teacher-led setting. This influential insight into EFL teaching may have fossilised the thinking of Western educators of how these Chinese characteristics differ from the liberal Western academic approach of using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). While there were endeavours to adopt the CLT model at some Chinese universities, there was also pushback with regards to cultural appropriateness and authenticity, issues with learning and teaching pragmatics, and ideological resistance (Hu, 2002, 2005; Zhang et al., 2013).

A major issue with the stereotyping of Chinese ELT is that it projects a homogeneous teaching style to such a large country as China, with the notion that teaching and learning practices are rigid. Indeed, there is a counterpoint that learners from different regions of China do not adhere to a homogenous approach to learning (Wang & Moore, 2007), and that there was a paradigm shift in the Chinese culture to L2 learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). The use of technology, whether it is internet or mobile learning, has been integrated into Chinese ELT (Bao, 2013; Lu et al., 2013; Zhang, 2013) corresponding with a favourable perception by some Chinese teachers towards task-based language teaching (Liu et al., 2021). Any validity of such stereotyping fails to account for the variation in socioeconomic settings where the ELT takes place. One such variation relates to the divide between rural and urban regions, where provincial factors such as teaching practices, the quality of schools, and the availability of teaching resources (Hu, 2003; Ma et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2017) result in the outperformance of urban students of their rural peers. Moreover, the prevalence of local, rural EFL teachers, who originated and are teaching in these regions, comprises a cohort of educators with a dislike of the profession and who use it as a tool for social mobility, either to teach at more prestigious urban schools or at the university level (Gao & Xu, 2014). Another study noted that the Chinese context of learning focused on textbooks and memorisation whilst the Australian learning philosophy focused on exploratory/experimental learning and groupwork. Despite this, there was commonality of socioeconomic status being a determinant for the application of learning activities from both a Chinese and Australian learning environments (Tao et al., 2013).

1.1 Clash of Academic Teaching/Learning Paradigms

The difference in learning paradigms does not automatically imply that Chinese (or other Asian) students, are reticent to moulding their learning styles towards Western methods. A study of Asian students studying at a Singapore university in a transnational program run by Australian academics (Dunn & Wallace, 2004), reported that while Asian students have a learning preference for group activities, they also wanted to present themselves as knowledgeable in the subject matter. This Asian learning paradigm of having the known knowledge differs from the western learning style of discovery, where the learner transitions from what is unknown to uncover the known knowledge. Also, Wang and Moore (2007) observed that while Chinese students studying a postgraduate course in Australia had the ability and were responsive to learner-centred activities, they noted that Australian academics should have provided better teaching instructions. The lack of intercultural empathy was further noted with a study of US academics teaching in a transnational program at a Chinese university (Ho, 2010), where Chinese students considered Chinese instructors as being more competent, despite their American counterparts being more qualified. This critique of linking competence with the lack of adjustment and discernment towards Chinese students' learning styles, created a less than favourable impression of American instructors' teaching ability.

The differences between Chinese and Western ELT approaches in their learning environment could play a significant role when Chinese students shift from the familiarity of their home academic environment to an unfamiliar academic paradigm in a cross-cultural setting, especially where they are concerned about language proficiency, inside and outside of the university setting (Sawir et al., 2012). It is highly likely they may encounter academic shock, framed as culture shock in an academic context, which entails recollection of the U-curve hypothesis (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Lysgaard, 1955) and the Cultural Dimension theory (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede, 2001), where these archetypal models would cause academic 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960). This academic shock exerts additional pressure, given the high stakes strategy of studying at a prestigious overseas university, to acquire the necessary social capital as instrumentation for their future economic and career goals (Xiang & Shen, 2009; Yeung, 2013).

1.2 Significance of the Study and Research Question

There have been studies of academic adjustment of Chinese international students in an European context (Ramelli et al., 2013; Rienties, 2012; Zhu, 2016), the US context (McLaughlin et al., 1997), and Australian context (Anderson & Guan, 2018; Ramsay et al., 1999). However, this paper will triangulate quantitative and qualitative data, i.e., a mixed methods approach, instead of framing from the perspective of a qualitative or quantitative lens alone. The following research questions will examine the nature of academic adjustment that Chinese students underwent during their sojourn:

(1) What aspects of Australian academic practices did Chinese international students find empowering as well as problematic?

(2) What role did Chinese international students perceived language competency have in influencing their academic adjustment?

(3) How effective were the academic support programs in enabling their academic adjustment?

2. Method

This paper consists of two separate studies conducted in chronological order. The first study (Study 1) was part of a broader quantitative data analysis study examining Chinese students' cross-cultural adaptation (CCA) experiences, i.e., the experiences these international students faced during their adjustment phase in an unfamiliar cultural environment. The second study (Study 2) was a short-term longitudinal study of Chinese students' first year experiences. The specific focus on the first year of their Australian academic sojourn was designed to capture the chaotic events affecting their transition which occurred during their Australian academic sojourn.

2.1 Recruitment

For Study 1, eligible Chinese international students, from the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, were sent an email link from a filtered database on behalf of the university registry, to participate in an online survey.

The second study was conducted after the completion of the data collection and analysis of Study 1. Due to the need to protect the confidentiality and privacy of Chinese international students in the first study, as a condition from both Human Ethics committee and the university administration to allow for email invitations of the survey, these prior participants were not, or could not be, invited to participate in Study 2. Therefore, recruitment for this study involved the placement of advertisements across various university campus sites. The criteria for participation were that

students had to come from Mainland China and Hong Kong and had commenced their first year of residing and studying in Australia.

2.2 Participants

There were 120 Chinese international students from Study 1, who gave their responses regarding academic issues, even though some question sets had non-responses; while 15 Chinese international students were recruited for Study 2.

2.3 Data Collection

The responses from the online survey were transposed onto a spreadsheet in preparation for data analysis. The questions, from this section of Study 1, asked participants: their difficulties with the teaching activity using a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 inferred 'no difficulty' with the teaching activity, while 4 was 'very problematic'; questions related to their self-rated language competency used a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 was rated 'very poor', while 5 was 'very good'; questions relating to the effectiveness of academic workshops used a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 was rated 'very unhelpful' and 5 was 'very helpful'. The qualitative data from the feedback section of the questionnaire were recorded verbatim, and translation was provided when required.

The Study 2 participants engaged in a three-month longitudinal study, comprising of three semi-structured interviews as well as a writing task. The recorded interviews were sent to a transcription service, where the authors would compare the transcriptions against the recordings, and the transcriptions were edited to a more authentic version of the interview.

2.4 Data Analysis and Ethics Approval

The quantitative data from Study 1 was conducted on SPSS 22/24, where descriptive statistics, correlations and mean testing of the data was used. The qualitative data in Study 2 was coded in NVivo 12 for relevant themes, which was, then, triangulated with the findings of Study 1. Human Ethics approval was approved, before the commencement of each study, and the metadata for these studies were stored at the university repository.

3. Results

There were four main findings relating to Chinese international students' academic adjustment: 3.1: Issues relating to language competency and difficulties with teaching activities; 3.2: The role of academic workshops in assisting with their academic adjustment; 3.3: Dealing with assessment tasks and time management in the Australian context; and 3.4: The pedagogical attraction of academic freedom and critical thinking.

3.1 Academic and Communicative Difficulties

Approximately 70% of Study 1 respondents (as per Table 1, Theme 1) claimed they had adjusted to the academic paradigm within the first 6 months, i.e., their first semester of study in Australia. One insight from a participant is from Study 2, Mei-Li, who commented on the need for Chinese students to have a high state of preparedness given that each subject, and respective examinations, are one semester long instead of being annual subjects from a Chinese context. A comparative study from Briguglio and Smith (2012), noted that nearly all of their Chinese student participants claimed they had adjusted to the Australian context within the first 6-months but this comes with the caveat that the cohort came from the same discipline and from the same university in China, which might not be representative of the broader CCA experiences of new international students studying in Australia.

The next set of common themes (Table 1, Themes 2 to 4) related to difficulties with their academic adjustment with regards to the omission or truncation of teaching content during lectures; timing of cue-taking during discussion groups, and lack of familiarity with teaching activities. The findings from Study 1 indicated these academic difficulties were regarded as 'minor' by our participants, even though those in their first year of study found these difficulties to be marginally more difficult by comparison. The data from Study 2 alludes to a lack of familiarity with Australian academic practices in the initial stages of their sojourn as being the causation of their apprehensions.

The first area of apprehension related to when academic staff elect to truncate their teaching material (Table 1, Theme 2), e.g., a participant, Lien-Hua, noted that the lecturer only spent a minimum amount of time regarding a key concept of her course. This minimal focus by the lecture had caused Lien-Hua some concern, as she had to adjudicate whether this teaching concept was either important or irrelevant, which caused some trepidation. She cited other students in her class, who were international students, as also sharing this same concern, which increased this collective fear. Another aspect related to a lack of familiarity with teaching activities (Table 1, Theme 4), and one participant, Huang, commented on a V-shaped CCA experience regarding her motivation for her academic studies, where her uncertainty regarding the assessment task and the respective grading of this activity caused a sharp drop in

motivation. However, when her fears were proven to be unfounded, this resulted in her motivation increasing sharply, as her grades reinforced her grasp of the contents taught. In either case, this uncertainty with initial understanding of their academic studies in an Australian context reinforces the high stakes nature of their academic sojourn (Xiang & Shen, 2009; Yeung, 2013).

Table 1. Themes of academic and communicative issues from quantitative (Study 1) and qualitative (Study 2) findings

Theme	Study 1	Study 2
(1) Academic adjustment within the first 6 months	83 out of 119 participants (i.e., 70%)	Because I finished my exams and actually in China my friends are having exams now. So, we have some chat and I can see that the exam like system is like very different and so I feel like here the exam is like testing... You have everything organised in the very first of the semester because you have like a semester plan but in China you won't know like the local thing or something like that. So, very organised and like step by step thing.
		(Mei-Li, Interview 3)
(2) Omitting/ truncating lecture material presented	Cohort: N = 120; M = 1.95; SD = 1.03 In-country less than 1 year: N = 18; M = 2.33; SD = 1.24	But here, just give you through a topic. In the end, you have to write the things related to the finance and the marketing, use business model. But what is business model? The teacher just spend less than five minutes in a class, in one slide, PowerPoint. So, there's not only me confused about these things. I think a lot of students in class have similar problem. That's the difference, I think.
		(Lien-Hua, Interview 3)
(3) Cue-taking during group discussions	Cohort: N = 120; M = 1.91; SD = 1.00 In-Country less than 1 year: N = 18; M = 2.17; SD = 1.10	I am finding hard to communicate with the English speaking classmates. They always want to talk about themselves and share their feeling in group discussion. It's like they don't care other thoughts. They were so impatient when I talk.
		(Melanie, Journal, Week 3)
(4) Adjustment (lack of familiarity) to teaching activities	Cohort: N = 120; M = 1.88; SD = 0.91 In-country less than 1 year: N = 18; M = 2.06; SD = 1.06	Um, I think if I draw a diagram of my motivation it must be in the shape of V, [laughs], because, like, uh, at first I think I have a high motivation of studying here and when it goes to the assignment week, [laughs], I, I feel demotivated because I, at that time, I, I don't know what it will be, although I have the criteria of marking, criteria, and, but I'm still unsure about, um, marking or something like that, although many people told me that don't be nervous, you will be all right, but I'm still feeling, like, kind of demotivated. But after that and until the session break, um, I saw I got some of the grades and yes, it's true, I, I didn't need to feel too worried about that, so, yeah, [laughs], my motivation goes up again.
		(Huang, Female, Interview 2)

(5) Difficulties with listening skills during classroom discussions	Correlation of self-rated listening skills with Lecturer/Tutor speaking too fast: $r(113) = -0.41$, $p < 0.01$. Self-rated confidence with listening skills: Cohort: N = 113; M = 3.42; SD = 0.89 In-country less than 1 year: N = 18; M = 2.94; SD = 1.00	Um, well, Uh, [laughs], there's an interesting story because, um, when I attend the first tutorial, um, the tutor asked me a question, but I didn't understand because her accent, so I told her, uh, sorry, I, I do not understand your question because your accent. [Laughs]. So, after that, every tutorial, [laughs], the teacher ask me to ask question one or two times, [Laughs]. (Mulan, Interview 2)
(6) Self-rated confidence with writing skills	Cohort: N = 113; M = 2.94; SD = 0.91 In-country less than 1 year: N = 18; M = 2.56; SD = 0.86	Yeah, I think writing a paper and finishing it before, to deal with it was a really difficult pattern for me because I didn't know how to do, I thought my English was really good, I mean the writing skill. Because I got IELTS test, like, I had got a really good mark, so 7.5 or seven, I don't remember. But, like, I felt I was really good so I could probably handle everything in the writing. But the first time of showing my paper to the professor, because our uni, I think the good thing, I love our uni, is they've got five full-time professor to help you with your essay and everything. So, I show my essay to him, he was, like, ah, what the, yes, it's, like, what are you writing? It's not really grammatically right, so you're actually basically writing Chinglish, so I was doing English, like, in Chinese way. So, I was really struggling that time. So still so far, I've been, yes, still going, not really good but still going. (Xing, Female, Interview 3)
(7) Self-rated confidence with reading skills	Cohort: N = 113; M = 3.40; SD = 0.91 In-country less than 1 year: N = 18; M = 3.33; SD = 1.03	And for reading because we have a lot of things to read every week and mmm it's not only help you to understand the contents but also, yeah, you have to... There are many umm strange words too and you have to find them up and the skill will like improve gradually. (Mei-Li, Female, Interview 3)
(8) Self-rated confidence with speaking skills	Cohort: N = 113; M = 3.17; SD = 0.93 In-country less than 1 year: N = 18; M = 2.61; SD = 0.98	Yes. Ah, since we last met, we had a group project with other classmates. At the beginning, and because my language is… I mean my English is not my first language, and when I speak in the group, sometimes other student, they thought it doesn't make sense. Um, I felt a little bit frustrated at the beginning, but once I explaining… Ah, explained to them, they, they, they, they thought, oh, yes, um, that makes sense. So, kind of… (Melanie, Female, Interview 3)

While Chinese international students may experience some problems with the transition of learning/teaching styles from a Chinese to Australian academic environment, what proved more problematic was the competency of their language abilities to manage the rigours of Australian academic study (as per Table 1, Themes 5 to 8). A starting point, from Study 1, is that even considering the self-rated confidence of language skills at a cohort level (which included many students who resided in Australia for more than 4 years), the mean confidence was just above the neutral level of 3.00, except for writing skills for which M = 2.94, i.e., below neutral. Moreover, when analysing participants who resided in Australia for less than one year, the self-rated mean confidence in language skills was significantly lower that the cohort mean and below the neutral level, i.e. M < 3.00; apart from self-rated reading skills.

Another aspect, from Study 1, was a correlation of self-rated listening skill with academic teaching staff speaking too quickly, which recorded a moderately negative (statistically significant) correlation (Table 1, Theme 5). Our participant from Study 2, Mulan, noted her difficulties comprehending the accent of her tutor (who was of Turkish background). Indeed, the problem with speakers with stronger accents presents a more challenging facet for listening comprehension in an academic setting (Ockey & French, 2016; Ockey et al., 2016; Xue, 2013; Zhu & Sharp, 2022) as they are dealing with authentic language in a multicultural setting, rather than the British/American accents used in the language proficiency tests used for university admissions. These stronger accents could pose some problems for Chinese international students during the initial stages of their academic sojourn.

Feedback from both studies shared common themes, where some students perceived the grading of the assessment tasks was unfair, and they had difficulties dealing with university staff. These insights support earlier studies relating to the need to provide better teaching instructions (Wang & Moore, 2007), and a lack of intercultural empathy by university staff towards Chinese students (Ho, 2010). If Chinese students equate the poor intercultural empathy with poor teaching instructions from Australian instructors in comparison to the instructive teaching style from a Chinese context, then, while these students might attain academic adjustment, it fossilises the reputation of Australian university staff having poor intercultural communication skills, and their failure to cater for Chinese students' learning style.

3.2 The Role of Academic Workshops Relating to Academic Adjustment

While Chinese international students may encounter difficulties in the initial stages of their academic sojourn, most Australian universities provide academic support programs to help both local and international students with their academic literacy to meet the required standards at an Australian university. Chinese students from both studies had noted benefits in providing self-confidence to their academic writing (Table 2, Theme 2) as well as assisting their academic adjustment by provided insights into Australian academic practices (Table 2, Themes 1 & 3).

Table 2. Themes relating to academic support from quantitative (Study 1) and qualitative (Study 2) findings

Theme	Study 1 (Results/Comments)	Study 2
(1) Effectiveness of academic literacy workshops in relation to correct referencing citation	Cite references correctly: N = 43; M = 4.00; SD = 0.79	Ah, the most effective things is they, they taught me how to reference things, that's very important thing to me because I don't have any experience about referencing before, and yeah that's all. (Zen, Male, Interview 2)
(2) Academic workshops scaffolding of self-confidence related to Essay/report writing; improvement in writing skills	Confidence in essay/report writing: N = 45; M = 3.64; SD = 0.98 Improvement with writing skills: N = 44; M = 3.61; SD = 1.02	I did attend a writing workshop. There a professional prepared me to write the essay, the pattern and the opening views and I think that was really helpful. I'm still using in that way. Sorry I forgot to mention. I'm still using it. I think that was really helpful. (Xing, Female, Interview 2) Yes, umm actually I went to two workshops, one was before the university started, it was the essay writing workshop, and then on week 8 to umm, the Parramatta Campus about grammar, and, yes, it has improved…… I think it's about, like, the English levels in writing, so I don't know the assignment one, but I think I can write more fluently, maybe. (Mei-Li, Female, Interview 2)
(3) Academic workshops providing insight to Australian academic system/learning paradigm	Adjustment to Australian university system: N = 45; M = 3.64; SD = 1.03 Adjustment to learning/thinking style: N = 43; M = 3.60; SD = 0.96	Oh, it's quite useful because, like, um, I got the information of essay writing from that academic, uh, literacy workshop and the teacher of that workshop also told me a lot of in-, useful information other than essay writing. Like, she helped me how to have a better understanding of this university and the teaching mode here. (Huang, Female, Interview 2) Umm, I'd say improve my English mmm, is more focused on how I structure my, my sentences in my writing, say for example. Because, umm I'm coming from a Chinese background, so when I'm doing my, umm English writing, I always think in Chinese but written in English. So, that's I know it's difficult to change, but umm I think it's difficult to change to those academic workshop really help me to, … adapt to the thinking in, adapt to way thinking in English. And how to adjust umm, adjust to the university's assignment, umm it's like they help me to correct my grammar and the structure. So, just helping me to make all my information that will go in the article in a more logical and understandable way. So that's how they help us.

		(Charles, Male, Interview 2)
(4) Issues for not using academic workshops	Clashed with my class timetable: 42 out of 74 responses (i.e., 57%) Outside activities preventing students from attending workshops: 37 out 72 responses (i.e., 51%)	Ah, yes, I... for the literacy it's quite cheeky I have always been like thinking to attend one. But the time is so clashing with my schedule so I attend the online one….. Cause online... the online workshop is like self-paced. So, [laughs] I just keep postpone doing it. So, I think it... it would be better if I go to the face to face one. (Melanie, Female, Interview 2)
(5) Ineffective academic workshop/training	I still hope the uni could provide Chinese students with more English speaking training. We do have many speaking workshops but it doesn't mean they are effective. Many Chinese students simply walk in and sit there for hours without understanding much. Most importantly, all the videos provided by the uni should be with English Subtitles for us to understand better. (C23, Female, Nursing)	Yeah, I did, I did go to the academic workshop …… but honestly, I don't think that helped me a lot because the teacher here they just tell you, you know, they give you some, some paper like that. They give you the paper and they told me, oh this is the Harvard reference style. You should follow that one. Every time you have some reference, you know, you have to, you have to change the format you just follow that or for the writing skills, they just tell you oh you have to follow all the exercise… So, sometimes they will give you some assignments, and you're going to write a short essay, research essay or the, or the I don't know how to say… Or the report, reflect report, but every time they… And I've, and I've already talked with my classmates, we all felt that academic workshop didn't help us a lot. We have, we have to you know memorise, we have, we have to learn that after the class. (Linda, Female, Interview 2)

While there was positivity emanating from these support programs, it also came with shortcomings. The first problem was that these programs clashed with class timetables or extracurricular activities for some Chinese students (Table 2, Theme 4). Also, there were some criticisms of the teaching style (Wang & Moore, 2007) deployed in the academic workshop (Table 2, Theme 5), where participants noted the instructors' lack of understanding and sympathy in accommodating to their learning styles (Ho, 2010). The participants, from Study 1, critiqued the diminished efficacy emanating from the delivery of these academic support programs; while the participant from Study 2 deemed the facilitation style from Australian instructors as passive and ineffective, where she sought affirmation from her Chinese peers attending this class. This position supports findings from other studies on the lack of empathy shown by Western academics (Ho, 2010; Wang & Moore, 2007), and from findings in the previous section of this paper relating to academic and communicative difficulties.

3.3 The Problem of Assessment Tasks and Time Management

A comment by one participant from Study 2, Song, exemplifies the high-stakes nature of undertaking studies at an overseas university (Xiang & Shen, 2009), when she stated: "since I came here to study mostly, and to experience life here at the same time but I still have to focus on studying. It's the most important thing at the moment". While most participants in Study 1 had adjusted within 6 months of commencement of studies (Table 1, Theme 1), the aspect of assessment tasks and time management was prevalent throughout Study 2.

Another participant, Zen, felt bewildered when transitioning from a Chinese to Australian academic context. As noted from the extract below, he was familiar with end of semester examinations in a Chinese context, which he

observed was "relaxing" and reasonable", in comparison to dealing with multiple assignments within a short timeframe. Zen admitted to feeling "a bit nervous" about undertaking such an endeavour, where negativity crept into his mindset, when he commented: "I feel I can't do that". Given the Chinese international student is undertaking a high-stakes wager when studying overseas, their uncertainty and anxiety about overcoming this complex academic transition involving assessment tasks could cause a loss of self-confidence, as noted earlier by another participant, Huang (Table 1, Theme 4).

Zen, Interview 2

Ah, because I, I didn't have that much assignments in China, in my, my whole life actually, except the, except the period when I was in high school. So, I was very use to the relaxing life in China, that, that reasonable, that reasonable study, so the first time that I found out I had to, I had to complete so much assignments in such a short time, I feel a bit nervous and I feel I can't do that.

The pressure from the numerous assessment tasks relates to the importance of time management. The experiences of another two participants, Mei-Li and Lien-Hua supported this notion, where they both noted the importance of time management as part of their academic studies. While there were some disciplines that had class contact times of less than ten hours per week, or two days per week, that seemed indulgent compared to the thirty to forty hours contact time in a Chinese context. However, a missing element was the implicit requirement to conduct self-study, where students need to engage in their own research, pre-reading, and preparation for their classes and assessment tasks.

In this context, Mei-Li initially saw the minimal class time as a boon, where she viewed her spare time to undertake social activities for which she viewed as an opportunity "to improve myself". However, when she realised that she should have spent that perceived free time towards her study, which was the purpose she came to Australia, she realised that "because of my poor time management I would like waste a lot of time and like kidding myself, I think, so... which actually it's, it's a factor that makes me very guilty and uncomfortable". This misconception of time management by Mei-Li had caused insurmountable stress as she crammed her assignments and exam preparations for which she found the lax Australian lifestyle to be an impediment.

In contrast, Lien-Hua was a studious student, who had managed her contact class time with her personal time for self-study. However, her problem was due to her onerous study commitment – her study/life balance was non-existent, where she observed: "I realised that if you want to finish your essay, you have to do the research, deep research, find the references, and read the books, read the reading materials. I just delayed or cancelled a lot of my plans on my plan list, such as visit different places". This high-level engagement with her study had subjugated Lien-Hua, to the symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013) of her academic studies – an adherence which was a necessity if she was to meet her future goals, but it came at the cost of having no social life in Australia, and she found this onerous.

While the notion of assessment task could be stressful on international students (Table 1, Theme 4), this academic culture shock could be mitigated if perseverance is maintained. Such perseverance can lead to empowerment and agency as this path of stress eventually leads to personal growth and greater resilience (Kim, 2001). The lack of familiarity with these academic practices, in comparison to their sociocultural CCA experience, may resemble the culture shock (Oberg, 1960) and recovery phase of the U-Curve (Lysgaard, 1955).

3.4 The Benefits of Academic Freedom and Critical Thinking

Despite difficulties encountered by Chinese international students transitioning from a Chinese to Australian academic paradigm while concurrently needing to improve their language competency, their experience was not entirely calamitous. An aspect detected from Study 2, was that the Australian academic environment was conducive to both academic freedom and critical thinking. Indeed, these two galvanising elements provide an enriching academic experience that they may not have received in the Chinese context.

There were some participants, who, after their initial reticence, were encouraged to ask questions in class. This approach differs from the traditional Chinese style of teaching, where the teacher is the font of knowledge. One participant, Chao, recognised an evolution in his learning style, as he started questioning aspects of his learning instead of blindly relying on information sources alone.

Chao, Interview 2

Hmm, that's a good question. I think just like I said, … now is the time I start to learn new things … More focused on asking questions. Sometimes I ask the lecturer about the study, … and … sometimes about the assignment and sometimes about the knowledge. Umm, before I normally find some answers to the questions from the internet and

sourcing online. Ah, so nowadays I think because of the learning environment, so I change myself a little to raise my questions in class or after the class. Yeah, there's a difference.

Another participant, Teegan, who had been critical of Australian academic practices, noted the concept of critical thinking had a positive "impact" on her academic learning style in Australia, as she realised that there were "two sides" of an argument.

Teegan, Interview 3

Ah, the significant impact, I think, I think it's critical thinking, yeah. The critical thinking helps you to, to realise things from the two sides. Maybe it help you negative impacts, and the, it helps the positive impacts.

It was noted that a student-centred teaching style does enrich the learning experiences of students (Lin, 2022; Prosser & Trigwell, 1997; Zhang, 2017), which is also conducive to a teaching environment that promoted critical thinking (Emir, 2013; Zhang, 2003). It should be emphasised that while our participants were favourable to this approach to their learning, they came to this realisation (by themselves) towards the end of the semester.

4. Discussion

Australian accredited teaching institutions are required to provide a minimum level of customer care to international students under the ESOS Act (Australian Government, 2015), where most Australian universities would market course requirements to these prospective students. While Australian universities provide information for the adaptation of international students to their new sociocultural environment, there is a lack of awareness to help international students adjust to their new academic conditions. In the case of Chinese international students, the cultural dimensions of their studying and living environment are at times, close to being polar opposites with the Australian dimension (Hofstede et al., 2010). While Chinese students are encouraged to engage in intercultural awareness and empathy (Zhu, 2011), it is also equally applicable for Australian educators and administrators, given Australia's position in an Asia-centric world (Gao, 2012), to take on more responsibility in these areas.

While there was an initial reticence towards the facilitation teaching style in an Australian context, once Chinese students accepted the benefits emanating from academic freedom and critical thinking, they embraced this new form of academic learning. An issue for Chinese students was adjustment to time management for self-study, and the adjustment to assessment tasks in an Australian context. There was also a symbiotic relationship between Chinese international students' academic adjustment and their language competency skills. Even though these students had attained the English language requirements for admission into an Australian university, there was still a transition period to refine their English language skills in the university environment, where specialised language registers are required, as well as dealing with authentic language in a multicultural setting, where strong accents from non-English speakers results in cognitive challenges to Chinese students' listening aptitude (Ockey & French, 2016; Ockey et al., 2016).

In relation to academic support programs, our findings noted benefits that aided Chinese international students' adjustment to the Australian academic paradigm, in relation to referencing requirements, adapting to different learning styles, and scaffolded confidence with academic writing. Nevertheless, there were complications, such as timetable clashes with academic and extracurricular activities, and the use of a facilitation teaching style when a teacher-led approach is more appropriate and effective for familiarisation with Australian academic practices at the embryonic stage of their academic sojourn.

Indeed, the "appropriateness" of teaching style is the common denominator to all three research questions. While Australian educators are familiar with the facilitation style, and the benefits of critical thinking with its in-depth, student-centred approach to learning, there was a lack of context provided to Chinese international students, given their familiarisation with the Chinese paradigm. This creates a chasm between Australian teaching and Chinese learning styles, where Chinese students perceive Western educators as lacking both intercultural awareness and empathy. Truly, this criticism is more than warranted, where supporting evidence from Zhu and Sharp (2022) found that UK academics focused on expertise rather than teaching quality, while Jabbar et al. (2020) critiqued the poor academic skillset and critical attitudes of UK academics towards international students. This educational context reinforces the need for intercultural communication competency (Bryam, 2009; Fantini, 2019), especially in an intercultural context, where many international students have a different learning frame, and they lack familiarisation with Western academic practices (Jabbar et al., 2020).

The findings of this mixed methods study supports the quantitative findings of Ho (2010), Wang and Moore (2007), coupled with the qualitative findings of Dunn and Wallace (2004) in relation to the lack of intercultural communication competence of Australian academics towards their Chinese students, as well as the language ability

issue in an Australian academic setting (Sawir et al., 2012). However, the scope of this paper only covers the topic of academic adjustment from the perspective of the Chinese international student. A wider issue may involve Australian academic staff engagement of either prejudicial or clandestine institutional racism (Lam & Hale, 2024). Another aspect is for universities to adopt a holistic approach, i.e., academic and non-academic needs of international students, to assist their academic and sociocultural adjustment to a foreign country (Shams, 2017).

5. Conclusion

Findings in this paper suggest that Chinese international students had difficulties with adjusting to their unfamiliar academic settings, compounded by Australian academics' lack of context in explaining the Australian academic paradigm. Even the academic support programs that are supposed to assist these students were rendered less effective by the facilitators' poor awareness of their teaching styles to assist Chinese learners' academic adjustment.

Limitations from this paper include the relatively low number of participants from Studies 1 and 2. However, this low level of participation was related to the exorbitant time commitment needed for each study, where Study 1 participants needed 45 minutes to complete the online questionnaire survey (of the larger study) and Study 2 participants needing to commit to a three-month longitudinal study with restrictive participation criteria. The demanding time requirements of each study may have dissuaded many prospective participants. Also, this study was conducted at one university in the Sydney area, where institution-specific factors may play an influencing role. A recommendation is that a comparable study be conducted across multiple universities, to ascertain whether issues found in this study are more widespread.

The lack of awareness and empathy from Australian academic and administrators, reflecting a more prevalent trend in the Western sphere, has been a persistent theme emerging from this study, and it is consistent with findings from previous studies. A more consequential question for future research, should be to examine the effects of corporatising Australian universities on the quality of international education teaching. Another area to examine is whether the social capital position of Australian academic and administrative staff has distorted their perception of education in the international classroom. A recommendation for Australian educators is to provide informational context between an Australian and Chinese academic approach, where an initial emphasis on a teacher-led style transitioning to a facilitation style as the teaching semester progressed to allow for familiarisation. This change would enhance the quality of international higher education teaching, as Chinese students embrace the strengths of Australian academic freedom and critical thinking, leading to greater creativity and an expanded academic worldview.

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