Re-examining the "Chinese learner": a case study of mainland Chinese students' learning experiences at British Universities

Author(s): Qi Wu

Source: *Higher Education*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (October 2015), pp. 753-766
Published by: Springer
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43648902
Accessed: 24-05-2019 10:53 UTC

High Educ (2015) 70:753–766
DOI 10.1007/s10734-015-9865-y

Re-examining the "Chinese learner": a case study of mainland Chinese students' learning experiences at British Universities

Qi Wu

Published online: 4 February 2015

Abstract Although a great deal of literature contrasts the Chinese learner with Western learning conceptions and practice, a closer look at these studies reveals that many are explored through the lens of cultural knowledge and assumptions. The results of these studies generate a distorted understanding of Chinese students. Moreover, students' learning is best explained in the context of local environments. This study therefore examines the "Chinese learner" through a case study of mainland Chinese postgraduate students' intercultural learning experiences at British universities. The results show that learning beliefs and behaviors evolve as individuals participate in authentic situations. It is essential to break the stereotypes of Chinese students and constantly document the progress of their learning so as to generate effective intercultural pedagogy and practices in culturally diverse classrooms. Further, how Chinese students approach their learning is a complex phenomenon with multiple facets interacting including external factors, namely sociohistorical, cultural, and academic contexts, and internal factors, such as each student's intellectual development. Academic staff in multicultural classrooms should recognize not just similarities but also diversity of students from the same culture and amend their teaching practices in response to students' developing needs and interests.

Keywords Intercultural education · Mainland Chinese students · Intercultural pedagogy · Learning approaches

Introduction

Higher education has seen significant changes in recent years. These changes include increasing numbers of students, further internationalization of the student population, and a

Q. Wu (✉)
Institute of Education, University of Reading, London Road Campus, Reading, Berkshire RG1 5EX, UK
e-mail: qi.wu.wsq@gmail.com

wider diversity in students' prior educational experiences. These factors have placed more pressure on the demand for intercultural pedagogy that can benefit students from different backgrounds and cultures. Although many cross-cultural studies on international students have emerged in recent years (Durkin 2011; Edwards et al. 2007; Gu et al. 2010; Ryan 2011; Tian and Lowe 2013; Turner 2013), these studies have employed similar frames of reference, such as, the influence of sociocultural or sociohistorical settings in which learning occurs on students' learning practices and beliefs. However, there have been few studies from a developmental perspective on the dynamic interrelations between international students' learning and their changed learning environment. Kettle (2005) has positioned international students as change agents in their new academic context, a largely overlooked insight in research on the experience of international students. Her view of international students as active learners, rather than passive recipients of knowledge, implies a greater sense of autonomy among international students. The recognition of students' strategic agency to survive in a new academic context is developed by Arkoudis and Tran (2007) through an exploration of ways international students adjust to disciplinary discourses at their host university and is firmly supported by Marginson (2014) who concludes that international students are able to break out of the influences of their own cultures and become active participants in the new environment. In a similar vein, Ryan (2011: 631) proposes that international students should not be seen as a "problem" to be solved, but as contributors to the development of good practice in the internationalization of higher education. Thus, studies that challenge the existing misconceptions about international students, particularly those from Eastern cultures, represent a newer strand of intercultural studies.

This study aims to challenge the common assumptions about Chinese students in Western institutions by examining a range of learning behaviors. Importantly, this study reviews frequent issues in Chinese students' learning behaviors in Western institutions that are often reflected in the literature and explores the underlying reasons for such practices from not only a sociocultural but also a developmental perspective. Thus, this study better reflects the impact of a changing learning climate on Chinese overseas students' learning compared to previous work. Through consideration of the findings, university academic and support staff can gain a fuller awareness of what kind of teaching techniques and support should be provided.

Background

Previous studies on the Chinese learner

Studies on Chinese students have not reached a general agreement on what the notion of the "Chinese learner" really entails. The category has been applied loosely as an umbrella term to refer to all students from Chinese-speaking backgrounds or even all those who share Confucian heritage. As a result, students from East Asia in general have been broadly defined as coming under the umbrella of "the Chinese learner" (Watkins and Biggs 1996). In addition, this term underplays the diversity within different Chinese cultural groups; Cross and Hitchcock (2007) use the phrase "the learner from China" to distinguish students from different Chinese societies. However, this notion fails to differentiate the diverse features of students from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Students from China have much in common; however, they differ in terms of the influences of their respective histories, social policies, educational systems, values, and beliefs (Back and Barker 2002). Students from Hong Kong, for example, are more familiar with British

academic conventions and can interpret teachers' expectations and course requirements more effortlessly than those from mainland China (Sit 2013). In short, the inaccuracy of the term "Chinese learner" is unhelpful (Ryan and Louie 2007), and the flawed assumptions about the homogeneity of students who may be referred to by the term indicate a need for more systemic and detailed investigation.

The problematic nature of the aforementioned conception of Chinese learners has not deterred scholars from making ambitious generalizations about Chinese students. From an essentialist point of view, students from Confucian heritage cultures may typically display a reluctance to speak up or give their opinion; rely heavily on memorization; lack critical thinking; respect the authority of the teacher; and expect to be spoon-fed (Durkin 2011; Turner 2013). Students brought up in such a learning culture may seem incapable of deploying different learning styles in different contexts. In contrast, a constructivist viewpoint argues that students modify their learning strategies in accordance with their learning environment and desired learning outcomes. Empirical studies focusing on contextual influences suggest that Chinese overseas students' approaches to learning are not vastly different from those of their Western counterparts (Gieve and Clark 2005). Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that besides cultural factors, personal, psychological, and pedagogical factors are equally important in influencing students' learning (Ramburuth and McCormick 2001; Rastall 2006). Due to the diverse prior experiences and motivations of individuals engaging in education abroad (Wu 2014), caution needs to be exercised in making generalizations about Chinese students and their learning behaviors.

Multiculturalism, interculturalism, and intercultural pedagogy

Two different terms, "multiculturalism" and "interculturalism," have been frequently employed in a wide range of contexts in recent years due to the increase in transnational activities in the social and work lives of most people globally. The term "multiculturalism" is used to describe a society in which different cultures coexist such that each member "should have equal rights in all spheres of society, without being expected to give up their diversity" (Castles 2004:24). The main aim of multicultural education is to acknowledge and respect various cultures (Portera 2011). However, this view overlooks the importance of cross-cultural communication.

To some degree, in contrast to multiculturalism, "interculturalism" evokes the idea of interaction between cultures. It encourages people of different cultures to engage with each other and learn from each other and emphasizes the importance of direct exchange of ideas, principles, and behaviors (Portera 2011). When this concept is applied in education, it emphasizes learning from cross-cultural interactions as a crucial part of the education process. Intercultural education builds on the benefits of multicultural education, which acknowledges and respects other peoples and cultures, and encourages students to come to know and understand each other and accept diversity in order to integrate.

Despite the theoretical debates on the relative advantages of multicultural and intercultural education, both approaches are founded on the same epistemological principle, that is, the existence of a multicultural learning environment, and both have the same ultimate goal, that is, the development of a fair and inclusive learning environment. Intercultural pedagogy, an integral part of intercultural education, filters the teaching and learning process and practices through intercultural aspects. Rather than simply emphasizing the existence of other cultures, intercultural pedagogy highlights the interactive nature of intercultural learning, which consciously values and integrates complexity and diversity (McLean and Ransom 2005). Intercultural learning will not occur spontaneously

if students of different nationalities simply coexist in the same classroom; instead, in truly intercultural education, the diversity of international students must be recognized as an asset (Ryan 2011: 631; 2013).

Substantial research on intercultural education has focused on the learning experiences of international students in overseas institutions. However, very few of these intercultural studies have specifically focused on the experiences of mainland Chinese students. Our study strives to promote the development of a coherent and effective intercultural pedagogy by extending and enhancing the knowledge of the diversity and dynamics of international student learning, particularly the varied features of students from mainland China. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What challenges did mainland Chinese students encounter while studying in Britain?
2. How did mainland Chinese students studying in Britain overcome academic challenges?

Research methods

Interviews are a powerful and flexible data collection method used to gather more in-depth information from individuals than can be done using surveys. The purpose of the interview in our study was to enable students to think deeply, talk freely, and "actually construct their social worlds" (Silverman 1997:21). Further, the semi-structured interviews used in the present study were flexible enough to allow us to steer questions into areas that could provide richer insights. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin in order to allow students to discuss the issues more freely. Students in this study were recruited in two ways. We presented ourselves at various sites around the British universities (e.g., lecture rooms, the student computer room, university housing, and the library) and handed out our invitation cards with demographic questions and our contact details. In addition, we approached departmental/institutional directors or relevant persons with a request to email invitations to all registered mainland Chinese postgraduate students in the academic year 2009/10 to participate in the study. Students who volunteered to participate in the research could contact us by email or phone.

Purposive sampling methods were adopted to select matched interviewees in terms of gender, course program, age, and residential area in mainland China to ensure less biased and more representative views. The majority of the students interviewed were taking business and management-related programs. In total, 14 voluntary respondents participated in interviews in the final term of 2010 in order to share their academic experiences at British universities (see Table 1). Interviews ranged from 30 min to 1 h. The three case universities were purposefully selected to represent a range of attributes in terms of size, geographic location, and history. All three major types of British university were covered: University 1, a university college, mainly provides teaching-focused degree programs within a specialist field and was coded as U1 in this study; University 2 was a large research-intensive university (coded as U2); and University 3 was a former polytechnic institute that was awarded university statues in the early 1990s (coded as U3).

Data analysis

The grounded theory approach was employed to gather the relevant information and seek themes emerging from the interview data (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001; Robson 2002).

Table 1 Summary of interview respondents

University/location	Participants	Gender	Age	Program	Area of residence in China
University 1 (U1) West Midlands	Leo	M	<24	Business	Nanjing
	Qiao	F	<24	Tourism	Qingdao
	Fang	F	<24	Hospitality	Hangzhou
	Ben	M	<24	Hospitality	Dalian
University 2 (U2) southeast	Wendy	F	<24	Bioscience	Beijing
	Justine	M	≥25	Finance	Guangzhou
	Allen	M	<24	Economics	Chengdu
	Tao	M	<24	Finance	Shanghai
	Tina	F	≥25	Education	Wenzhou
	Sun	M	<24	Economics	Liaoning
University 3 (U3) London	Wang	M	≥25	Journalism	Beijing
	Mei	F	≥25	Journalism	Beijing
	Huang	M	<24	Finance	Shenzhen
	Lulu	F	<24	Psychology	Guangzhou

Grounded theory can be described as a kind of comparative analysis, because consistent methods are used to compare data collection, codes, concepts, and categories in order to analyze the similarities and differences within and between them (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Under the grounded theory principle, interview data analysis is a spontaneous rather than a predetermined process. The analysis started with line-by-line coding; next, the coded data were structured according to theme and then into conceptual categories. Throughout the process, categories were constantly compared until the core categories, or final themes, emerged. A specialized qualitative data analysis package, NVivo 8, was used to organize and manage the coded themes and identified patterns.

Intercultural learning experience: challenges and strategies

Q1: What challenges did mainland Chinese students encounter while studying in Britain?

Before entering British universities, the Chinese students, particularly novice students who were undertaking education abroad for the first time, faced various challenges, which can be divided into four themes: classroom participation, group learning, teaching and learning, and assessment. These themes are interrelated, but we discuss them separately, highlighting the variety of challenges that students encountered during their postgraduate study.

Classroom participation

For many students, questioning and challenging peers and lecturers engendered acute discomfort, particularly at the start of their program. Given their prolonged experience in the didactic educational context, some of them psychologically resisted interrupting. This view is reflected in the statement below:

> Lecturers have their teaching objectives to complete. I shouldn't deter the flow of the lecture. In China, I have never come across someone suddenly raising his/her hand up and asking questions in front of the whole class. (Wendy, U2)

Having spent years being provided with answers by authority figures, it was common for students to miss the point of questioning lecturers and textbook content in class. Openly expressing one's opinion and evaluating others' opinions, in the view of some interviewed students, might seem meaningless. For example, one student stated:

> Chinese students are accustomed to attending class quietly. Why speak up? It is the teachers' responsibility to deliver the "right" knowledge in class.... What is the point of questioning them? (Leo, U1)

The above view supports those of Durkin (2011), who concluded that the lack of participation in discussion is at least partly due to the Chinese teaching and learning environment, which does not create situations where asking questions are seen as necessary. Instead, the interviewed students claimed that they preferred to converse with their teachers and peers privately after class.

In addition, the stress of revealing their own personal views or exploring those of other students publicly reinforced the students' tendency to speak less. In general, they only participated in a conversation when they had something "safe" to say and emotionally avoided criticizing and being criticized. This sentiment was linked with feelings of anxiety and defensiveness, which stemmed from the need to protect themselves, as seen in the following remarks:

> I tend to wonder what would happen if I give a "wrong answer"? Since I am unsure about it, I will keep quiet and just listen. (Justine, U2)

> Sometimes when I heard someone raise a question, I would say in my mind: "My god, this is so simple and not worth a discussion." How do they have the courage to speak up without fear of others thinking they are stupid? (Wang, U3)

> I think my classmates would judge me. For example, if I say something they already know, ... (Mei, U3)

In line with a range of research evidence, many Chinese students' silence seems to link with their insufficient English language skills (e.g., Edwards et al. 2007; Gu et al. 2010), their learning culture (Gu et al. 2010; Turner 2013), and their personal traits, such as their shyness and modesty (Ryan 2013). It also appeared that their silence in class was associated with their personal quality, that is, individuals' stage of intellectual development. Students at an intellectually dualistic stage tend to believe knowledge is something absolute, divided into right or wrong, and the right answer is to be handed down from the authorities. Students with such an attitude are unlikely to see discussion as a legitimate way of gaining knowledge.

However, their quietness has no direct indication of a lack of interest in participating in discussion per se; instead, some preferred to participate in discussion in their own way. There was recognition that communication was not just about speaking, but also about what the students were thinking in their minds, as Wang (U3) continued:

> Our Chinese people would think carefully before speaking up. For me, I will speak only when I can bring up something valuable. Otherwise, I am a "bystander," who speaks less and listens more. In the meantime, I quietly compare their opinions with mine.

It is worth noticing that contrasting behavior was also found among this cohort. Rather than being a "passive" audience sitting through the whole lecture, some determined to overcome their fears, adopting a "thick face" so that they could benefit from participatory classroom. The notion of "thick face" emphasizes the courage to admit one's own mistakes. This is different from shamelessness, as the intention behind projecting a thick face is to re-establish or regain one's face through learning lessons from one's wrongdoings (Fang 1999). For example, Qiao (U1) made the following comment: *Since I am here, I don't want to be the silent one. I don't mind people laughing at me because of my English.*

In reality, they were struggling to maintain their enthusiasm for new experiences in the early months of their program, with their not yet fully developed knowledge and related skills; as Qiao later realized that she could not find the right time to pose questions:

> I really want to take part in their discussion, but I can't keep up with them. They seem to know more than me. It is hard to squeeze into their conversation (Qiao, U1)

Several other factors preventing this cohort from effectively participating in classroom discussion have been overlooked by previous studies in this area. One such factor is the diversity of dialects spoken by teachers from different parts of Britain. It was a recurring concern for a number of interviewed students when they attempted to participate in classroom conversation, as one student explained:

> I now can understand my tutor with an Irish accent, but at the outset of the course, not even a word. Most of my time was spend figuring out what the question was about. (Huang, U3)

In addition, the mixture of ethnicities in the international student population and of their various English accents contributed to a stressful classroom environment. While this situation may not bother overseas students whose first language is English, it was difficult for the interviewed students, who were mainly familiar with standard British and American English, to understand their peers. For example, one student confessed:

> Like [in] our international class, there are lots of different accents such as African English, Indian English, and many others. It is difficult to focus on the content of the conversation. (Wang, U3)

Group learning

There are similarities as well as differences between Chinese and British education systems (Ryan 2013). However, these similarities can easily mislead students to the real nature of academic practices in the changed context. Group learning is one of the traditional learning techniques used by Chinese students, but the criteria for successful learning groups are completely different from those applied in British universities. Group work under Chinese learning conventions often resolves itself into an approach where the academically strong team member(s) do most of the work:

> In China, we have group assignments, but if one teammate does the task, the rest do nothing. [Before coming here] I thought I was a competent team player. Compared to the students here, I realized acutely that I was really weak in this regard. (Qiao, U1)

> We were used to focusing on the marks received from a given piece of group work. So it was safe to let "smarter" team members in charge. Over here, I found that there

> were so many group projects. Everyone was responsible for different parts of the work. We had to work together as a [real] team. (Wang, U3)

Similar approaches to group learning were employed, but went through slight alterations in the measures of the superiority of team members. The standards used to select ideal team leaders varied with cultural mix of the group. The typical comment below explained how group work was run:

> When we work with local students, we are happy to have them take on the challenging part, which might be relatively easy for them, such as doing presentations on behalf of the rest of us. When we work with Asian students, we usually recommend the hardworking students take more responsibility. (Allen, U2)

Due to the influence of their previous experience with group learning, most of the students in this study admitted that they had a strong tendency toward conformity and were predisposed to be dependent on the stronger members in the group. Students starting group work in this new context are thus often at pains to learn to work as a team, as some of them stated:

> It was tiresome to work with students from other nations because they were continuously talking and did not arrive at a solution till the end. We wasted a lot of time [on discussion]. (Mei, U3)

> We had concerns about exposing the team members. If the lecturer knew someone in the team wasn't involved we would get a zero score. (Fang, U1)

Group work makes special demands off students. They need to critically reflect on their own culturally constructed learning habits and also be guided by teachers. It is essential that preparatory courses designed to address these concerns are given as part of guidance at the very beginning. These courses should present and explain beliefs commonly shared and practical skills needed to equip students to engage sufficiently with group learning. This support is particularly important for those who might not be ready to take on peer-oriented learning at this stage. If this is not adequately done, group learning will not only be time-consuming, but will also appear tedious and irrelevant to many students.

Teaching and learning

In the view of students who participated in this study, teaching practices in many Chinese universities were organized in a fairly traditional curriculum; university is the place where teachers give lectures in their fields of expertise and where students congregate to benefit from them. This is in sharp contrast to the British academic context, which is illustrated in the following comments:

> In China, teachers spend a large amount of time talking. The content of instructions is from one or two textbooks. You don't have to read more books afterwards. (Allan, U2)

> [Here], teachers only tease out the critical knowledge points from a range of books and other resources that should be covered in their teaching. After class you have to seek further course materials elsewhere to develop your own understanding. (Mei, U3)

Another new student could not help but wonder about the different ways of learning and teaching modes at the host university:

> I didn't understand why so many students study in the library when I started working here for the first time. Also I felt some sort of uneasiness when teachers didn't assign any homework after each lecture. There was nothing to do after class. (Tina, U2)

This kind of situation is new for Chinese students; the balance of the roles between students and teachers is totally changed. Clearly, this unexpected dramatic shift of authority from teaching to the individual student's learning is truly confusing for many newcomers to the student-oriented educational context. Although the authority-dependency conflict occurs not just among Chinese students, the level of conflict varies depending upon the student's original culture(s) of teaching and learning. It shows that when they plunge into a completely new teaching and learning context, students interviewed need time to find out their new role and develop particular skills related to their chosen program.

Assessment techniques

In most cases, students indicated that their academic success in China was defined largely in terms of their marks on the final examination papers. They were required to reproduce what they had been taught in lectures. One of the disadvantages of this assessment method is that it fails to leave much space for individualization or differentiation. When dealing with assessment at British universities, they found that memorization and repetition were not enough to meet the requirements of assessment, as two students stated:

> Here [in Britain], I found no matter how accurately I presented the main points that were taught in lectures, on the exam papers, [I] still got low marks. (Sun, U2)

> In China, you will find that everyone's answers are almost the same. But, here, it is impossible. Otherwise, you may make the teacher feel like you are copying others' ideas. (Wendy, U2)

Leaving exams aside, the final mark usually consists of several pieces of essay writing. When composing their essays, students who lacked knowledge of academic writing required at postgraduate level at the host university failed to find out what their teachers were looking for in their work, as one of them stated:

> I really don't understand why I have to write a two-page answer for an essay question. Because I know the answer and can complete it in a couple of sentences. (Wendy, U2)

The above comment indicates students' desire for greater clarity and transparency of assessment criteria with respect to what key knowledge, skills, and attitudes they will be evaluated on and what outcomes are expected from them. Although it is natural to assume that a basic description of an assignment is sufficient, Chinese students appear to have their own assumptions about the task when they embark upon their postgraduate programs at British universities. It seems absolutely critical that teachers in international classrooms clearly articulate the goals for an assignment. As students gain experience and are able to identify whether they are on track and predict what conflicts may occur, this explicit modeling can be gradually removed.

A concern associated with regard to assessment practice is the difficulty many Chinese students have in meeting essay-writing criteria. Although these standards are openly stated, it can be challenging for this cohort in the very short period of time available to dislodge

their habitual learning. One of the typical complaints was about critical thinking in preparing essays (Durkin 2011). It was fairly common for teachers to write comments on assignments such as "more critical." Students were unsure how to act appropriately:

> No matter how critical I felt I was, the lecturer always said it was not enough. I thought I was very critical and provided lots of different thoughts in my essay. The lecturer said I should dig deeper. (Tina, U2)

To criticize and evaluate a peer's work is normal academic practice for Chinese university students. However, the Chinese approach to judging and evaluating others' work is subtle and indirect, in keeping with the Chinese cultural values of harmony and respect for authority. When they come into British universities, it is crucial to sufficiently differentiate superficially similar pedagogic practices between their native country and the one they experience abroad. Ignorance of hidden cultural assumptions regarding assessment practice leads them to frustration.

Despite the above challenges, the interviewed students, by the end of their program, managed to develop new techniques that suited their individual temperaments. The techniques students used are discussed below.

Q2: How did mainland Chinese students studying in Britain overcome academic challenges?

The contrasts between the Chinese and British academic contexts brought about challenges for the students' achievement of effective learning. These challenges stimulated the students to question their previous learning modes and thereby come to a clearer understanding of what kinds of learning are most appropriate. Instead of conforming to the stereotypical image of Chinese students, the interviewed students tried out various approaches to learning from the moment they started their program at the British universities.

The most academically successful of the interviewed students developed a context-oriented learning attitude. Since undertaking their postgraduate program, they had learned to try out different learning modes, practice newly adopted skills, and observe others at the host university. Gradually, they had developed greater awareness of the complexity of cross-cultural learning and begun to strategically select their learning techniques as appropriate at various times. It is common that a student who is a passive learner in one context may become a more active learner in another, as shown in the following comments:

> We tend to memorize the "right answers" in order to pass exams in China. Here, significant changes in learning happened [as I was] preparing my essays. I learned to find the answers through critical thinking and intensive reading. (Lulu, U3)

> In China it is very easy to pass as long as I study hard for one or two weeks before exams. Here, the written assignments are difficult to mess around with. I had to read extensive sources suggested by the teacher throughout the course rather than relying on a last-minute strategy [, which] did not work here. (Tina, U2)

This is also evidence that the choice of one approach over another is based on its perceived relevance to the immediate context and to the demands of specific learning tasks. Taken further, the typical pedagogic techniques used in British universities—a mixture of formal lectures, small group learning, and individual self-study—have undoubtedly diversified the students' learning modes. Further, the assessment methods have significantly reshaped the students' approaches to learning (Tang 1999).

All the skills and abilities taught at British universities, however, were not adopted uncritically. One interviewed student argued that:

> It was a mind-opening experience as I learned to how to compose academic writing in the British style. But some of these writing skills may not be accepted in China. If I want to publish articles at home, I have to shift back to my conventional way of writing. (Tina, U2)

The above comment also shows that this student had realized that the appropriateness of a learning approach was highly contextualized. It is therefore a mistake to think that all knowledge and skills that are commonly recognized as useful or necessary in the British university context may be equally valued within the Chinese educational environment.

However, some students may lack the courage to take the risk of losing marks when facing the demand to develop new learning skills. Because of the shortness of master's programs and the need to defend against failure, several students chose to "play safe," lower their academic expectations, and rely on their luck. They recognized some inherent limitations in their habitual learning, but still resisted change:

> What I want is to meet the minimum requirements required to pass the module. I have no intention to change my approaches to leaning because there is no guarantee that the new ones will work. Compared with those hard-working students, spending much time in the library, who later still failed several modules, I only failed one. (Allen, U2)

Second, the provision of some sort of feedback is not merely a way of evaluating academic success. It also helps individuals alter their learning behavior when needed. This is supported to some extent by Tian and Lowe (2013), who found that the provision of formative feedback, although it presents students with cognitive challenges and psychological and emotional struggles in the early months of their program, bridges their transition to a new academic culture. Moreover, feedback was critical to help students avoid errors and self-monitor their performance, and to guide them toward the desired level of performance. For example, one student commented:

> I remembered the first exam. My Thai classmate was less confident than me. He failed to deliver the key points on the exam paper. This is because he ran out of time finding main points to remember in his preparation. Surprisingly, he got higher marks.... I read his exam paper and found that [here] teachers gave high marks on your reasoning. I tried this tip later. It worked well. (Justine, U2)

Again, students acknowledged that it was essential to adjust their approaches to learning in response to feedback relatively soon. In order to refine their understanding and skills, they put feedback into practice as soon as they had the chance.

Third, whether there is substantial improvement in students' skills as learning progresses also depends on the inclusiveness of the class and the attention to cultural diversity in the pedagogical practices. In the view of interviewed students, teachers in international classrooms could reduce the level of their anxiety by embedding disciplinary knowledge in sets of practices. When selecting course resources and designing learning tasks, an appreciation of the value of pluralism contributed to the formation of an open and positive attitude to learning. Mei's experience echoed this idea well:

> My lecturer here is absolutely an expert in his field. He consciously selects a wide range of texts that come from different resources in his teaching program, including

> those from China. His passion and openness trigger my desire for knowledge and love for this subject. (Mei, U3)

Finally, social media and other alternative online learning systems significantly reduced the level of initial frustration and stress of transition to the changed academic context. PowerPoint slides and other online resources on the Blackboard, a web-based learning system, to some extent cushioned the risk of a hard academic landing. Students in this study saw Blackboard as effective channel to access copies of in-class presentations, course content, videos and other media, and chat online anytime. They, therefore, were able to use their independent study time flexibly and effectively. In particular, e-mail allowed them to obtain timely support from academic staff. They argued that multimedia tools were provided at Chinese universities, but were rarely used for daily course delivery or faculty–student communication. This is reflected in the following quote:

> My teachers often posted lessons, quizzes and exams on Blackboard for us to view. I did not have to worry about anything if I missed their lesson. When I emailed the bits I did not understand, they would get back to me with some solutions. Lecturers in China never contact students via email. (Tao, U2)

There is evidence that students are constantly accommodating their approaches to learning as a result of contextual influences. When given sufficient time and the freedom to take risks in experimenting with newly adopted learning behaviors, they would finally integrate these learning skills and develop more effective learning techniques. However, such transformation in learning is not an automatic process. Students need a "safe" cross-cultural learning environment that allows for mutual trust and tolerance of "slow learning" to reach the stage of effective learning.

Conclusion

The initially exhibited learning behaviors of the students in this study seem to support the frequent conclusion that Chinese students at western universities are likely to deal with learning conflicts using a range of preexisting knowledge and skills. However, individuals' habitual ways of learning are based on cultural norms and experiences. Students cannot be disassociated from the environment in which they live. Their entry into a new academic context offers possibilities for the adoption of new practices to harmonize the contradictions between their own learning goals and abilities and external demands on them. It is therefore inaccurate to assume that initial challenges that students encounter will be problems for them forever.

In addition, pedagogies can transform students' learning. Chinese students' attitudes, behaviors, and modes of learning underwent continuous development as they engaged in different discourses and practices. Any evaluation of an effectiveness of Chinese students' learning should take into account the influence of the learning milieu as a whole. Frequent checks and measures are therefore needed to assess how exactly previous and current education has affected and is affecting the students' views and approaches.

Recognizing what can cause frustration in Chinese students' learning abroad and what strategies are used to survive these challenges is only the first stage in the process of enhancing the effectiveness of intercultural pedagogy. The development of intercultural education requires both academic staff and students to understand how their own culture influences their outlook and behavior. Such a self-reflective process prompts staff and

students to rethink their beliefs and biases, transcend limitations, and move to a stage of equal and meaningful cross-cultural dialogue. Both teachers and students also need to be critical and sensitive to the diversity of cultures they engage with and to any aspect of interaction and communication between "self" and "others." Meaningful intercultural learning can only occur if teachers and students share mutually defined practices, beliefs, and understanding.

Equality and diversity is another issue to be addressed in program design for international classrooms. Particular attention must be given to the relative value of pedagogy and curriculum, challenging the way staff and students think about discipline knowledge, teaching, and learning. Educational institutions should develop an awareness of diversity, recognize the value of differing learning cultures, and integrate them into curriculum and pedagogy. Students should be encouraged to study for their own purposes, exploiting their own potential, which may diverge from the goals of host universities. Though there is a long way to go, the chance to explore cross-cultural leaning issues through the perspectives of Chinese students at British universities has provided a glimpse of how pedagogical practices based on an intercultural theoretical framework can enhance students' learning experience in international classrooms. In future research, closer and longitudinal monitoring of the pedagogic influence of institutional culture and structure on Chinese students' learning is needed to develop a consistent intercultural learning and teaching approach to higher education.

References

Arkoudis, S., & Tran, L. T. (2007). International students in Australia: Read ten thousand volumes of books and walk ten thousand miles. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 27*(2), 157–169.

Back, A., & Barker, M. (2002). *Counselling students from Confucian-background countries.* In: Paper presented at the 13th National conference of ISANA 2002: Diversity in practice conference, Launceston, Tasmania.

Castles, S. (2004). Migration, citizenship, and education. In J. Banks (Ed.), *Diversity and citizenship education: Global perspectives* (pp. 17–48). San Francisco: Wiley.

Charmaz, K., & Mitchell, R. G. (2001). Grounded theory in ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delanont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 161–174). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cross, J., & Hitchcock, R. (2007). Chinese students' (or students from China's) views of UK HE: Differences, difficulties and benefits, and suggestions for facilitating transition. *The East Asian Learner, 3*(2), 1–31.

Durkin, K. (2011). Adapting to Western norms of critical argumentation and debate. In L. Jin & M. Cortazzi (Eds.), *Researching Chinese learners: Skills, perceptions, and intercultural adaptations* (pp. 274–291). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Edwards, V., Ran, A., & Li, D. (2007). Uneven playing field or falling standards? Chinese students' competence in English. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 10*(4), 387–400.

Fang, T. (1999). *Chinese business negotiating style.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Gieve, S., & Clark, R. (2005). "The Chinese approach to learning": Cultural trait or situated response? *System, 33*, 261–276.

Gu, Q., Schweisfurth, M., & Day, C. (2010). Learning and personal growth in a "foreign" context: Intercultural experience of international students. *Compare, 40*(1), 7–23.

Kettle, M. (2005). Agency as discursive practice: From "nobody" to "somebody" as an international student in Australia (1). *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 25*(1), 45–60.

Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 18*(1), 6–22.

McLean, P., & Ransom, L. (2005). Building intercultural competences: Implications for academic skills development. In J. Carroll & J. Ryan (Eds.), *Teaching international students: Improving learning for all* (pp. 45–62). London: Routledge.

Portera, A. (2011). Intercultural and multicultural education: Epistemological and semantic aspects. In C. A. Grant & A. Portera (Eds.), *Intercultural and multicultural education: Enhancing global interconnectedness* (pp. 12–30). New York: Routledge.

Ramburuth, P., & McCormick, J. (2001). Learning diversity in higher education: A comparative study of Asian international and Australian students. *Higher Education, 42*(3), 333–350.

Rastall, P. (2006). Introduction: The Chinese learner in higher education—Transition and quality issues. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 19*(1), 1–4.

Robson, C. (2002). *Real world research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Ryan, J. (2011). Teaching and learning for international students: Towards a transcultural approach. *Teachers and Teaching, 17*(6), 631–648.

Ryan, J. (2013). Listening to "other" intellectual traditions: Learning in transcultural spaces. In J. Ryan (Ed.), *Cross-cultural teaching and learning for home and international students* (pp. 279–289). London: Routledge.

Ryan, J., & Louie, K. (2007). False dichotomy? "Western" and "Eastern" concepts of scholarship and learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 39*(4), 404–417.

Silverman, D. (1997). Towards an aesthetics of research. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method, and practice* (pp. 239–253). London: Sage.

Sit, H. W. (2013). Characteristics of Chinese students' learning style. *IPEDR-Language, Media, and Culture II, 62*(8), 36–39.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tang, S. (1999). Student evaluation of teachers: Effects of grading at college level. *Journal of Research and Development in Education, 32*(2), 83–88.

Tian, M., & Lowe, J. (2013). The role of feedback in cross-cultural learning: A case of study of Chinese-taught postgraduate students in a UK university. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 38*(5), 580–598.

Turner, Y. (2013). Pathologies of silence? Reflecting on international learner identities amidst the classroom chatter. In J. Ryan (Ed.), *Cross-cultural teaching and learning for home and international students* (pp. 15–26). London: Routledge.

Watkins, D., & Biggs, J. (1996). *The Chinese learners: Cultural, psychological, and contextual influences*. Hong Kong/Melbourne: Comparative Education Research Centre/Australian Council for Education Research.

Wu, Q. (2014). Motivations and decision-making processes of mainland Chinese student for undertaking master's programs abroad. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 18*(5), 426–444.