

Cross-Cultural Academic Adaptation Among Chinese Short-Term Exchange Students in Malaysia: The Roles of Language, Pedagogy, and Face Culture

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growth of short-term international mobility, the academic adaptation of exchange students particularly in non-Western host settings remains under-researched. This study examined how language, pedagogy, and face culture shape the academic adaptation of Chinese short-term exchange students at a Malaysian higher education institution. Grounded in integrated socio-pedagogical conceptual framework, the study used an exploratory mixed-methods survey mode. Quantitative data were analysed with descriptive statistics, while open-ended responses were thematically coded. Adaptation difficulties centred on listening comprehension, lecturers' accents, and adjustment to student-centred learning, whereas Mianzi (face) norms exerted a moderate influence on classroom participation. Peer support, translation technologies, and lecturer accommodation emerged as the principal facilitators. Despite initial difficulties, participants reported greater confidence in academic English, increased willingness to participate, and favourable perceptions of Malaysian pedagogy. The study aims a preliminary integrated socio-pedagogical framework of short-term academic adaptation and offering guidance for host institutions and mobility programme designers.

Keywords: academic adaptation; short-term exchange students; student-centred learning; Mianzi (face culture); transformative learning; international student mobility

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has become an increasingly important destination for students from mainland China (Jiang et al., 2025; Singh & Xue, 2025), and academic adaptation as the multidimensional process of adjusting to new academic, linguistic, and sociocultural conditions is positively associated with academic performance (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Li et al., 2009; Liu & Ismail, 2025). Exchange students must contend with unfamiliar expectations, English-medium instruction, and foreign classroom norms, demands compounded when home and host educational cultures diverge (Heng, 2016; Zhou et al., 2008).

Short-term exchange students form a growing but distinct group: their compressed sojourn requires rapid adaptation with limited institutional scaffolding (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Zhang & Li, 2022), and although brief mobility can yield measurable gains in cultural adaptability (Mapp, 2012), entry-period distress and language barriers dominate early experiences (Chaiyasat, 2023).

For Chinese students, adaptation is complicated by the pedagogical distance between teacher-centred learning (TCL), transmission-oriented instruction at home and the student-centred learning (SCL) increasingly prevalent in contemporary higher education (Bhardwaj et al., 2025; Glava et al., 2024). In English-medium classrooms, rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, and specialized vocabulary strain comprehension (Hellekjær, 2017; Siegel, 2020), with accent identified as the largest source of listening difficulty (Diaz & Iqbal, 2024). Face norms may further restrain participation by discouraging public error and disagreement (Ting-Toomey, 2007; Wu, 2009; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018).

Three gaps constrain this literature: research concentrates on Western hosts, focuses on degree-seeking students, and treats language, pedagogy, and face as separate domains. This study therefore investigated the academic adaptation of Chinese short-term exchange students in Malaysia within a framework of perceived pedagogical adjustment consistent with aspects of transformative-learning theory.

It contributes by examining underrepresented in the literature on population, integrating affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of adaptation, and deriving evidence-based recommendations for host institutions and programme designers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic adaptation spans psychological and sociocultural domains (Ward & Kennedy, 1999), and systematic evidence indicates that personal, sociocultural, and situational factors jointly shape adjustment, with student engagement partially mediating its link to performance (Liu & Ismail, 2025; Mao, 2025). Language is the most consistent barrier: in EMI settings, comprehension is impaired by speech rate, accents, and variation in lecturer delivery (Hellekjær, 2017; Siegel, 2020), and accent is the dominant source of listening difficulty for international students (Diaz & Iqbal, 2024).

For Chinese students, adaptation entails relearning language and communication styles and internalizing unfamiliar participation norms, tensions that are well documented in both long-term qualitative and survey research (Heng, 2016; Lai et al., 2023). Face concerns help explain classroom reticence and avoidance of public debate (Wu, 2009; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018); however, scholars caution against over-generalized cultural attributions, since silence varies across individuals and can constitute strategic participation rather than deficit (Chung, 2021; Zhang, 2022).

Short-term sojourns present a distinct scenario: a survey of 155 Chinese short-term students across 16 countries identified host-country knowledge, language proficiency, and sense of participation as crucial, while length of stay showed no significant correlation with adaptation (Zhang & Li, 2022). Exchange students experience peak distress at entry (O'Reilly et al., 2010), face language barriers as their foremost initial challenge (Chaiyasat, 2023), yet show significant adaptability gains across the sojourn (Mapp, 2012).

The Malaysian literature, although growing, is limited to degree-seeking students. Reviews attribute Chinese students' difficulties largely to language barriers and divergent pedagogical norms (Singh & Xue, 2025); qualitative studies of undergraduates report recurring language, teaching-style, and collaboration challenges (Jiang et al., 2025; Wang, 2026), and survey evidence shows language and academic challenges negatively affect learning sustainability (Yassin et al., 2020). Critically, existing Malaysian studies rarely employ explicit theoretical frameworks linking language, pedagogy, and face culture.

This study integrates transformative learning theory concept, which holds that a disorienting dilemma can trigger critical reflection and perspective transformation (Calleja, 2014; Rojo et al., 2022; Schalkwyk et al., 2019); participation patterns to "Mianzi" or face culture, which explains how collectivist norms motivate face-protective behaviours; and perceived pedagogical adjustment, which distinguishes affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

Synthesizing these, the study proposes an socio-pedagogical adaptation as a conceptual synthesis in which Chinese educational norms generate pedagogical friction through language barriers, participation anxiety, and face concerns, while pedagogical literacy, coping strategies, and institutional support facilitate adaptation and yield positive post-mobility outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

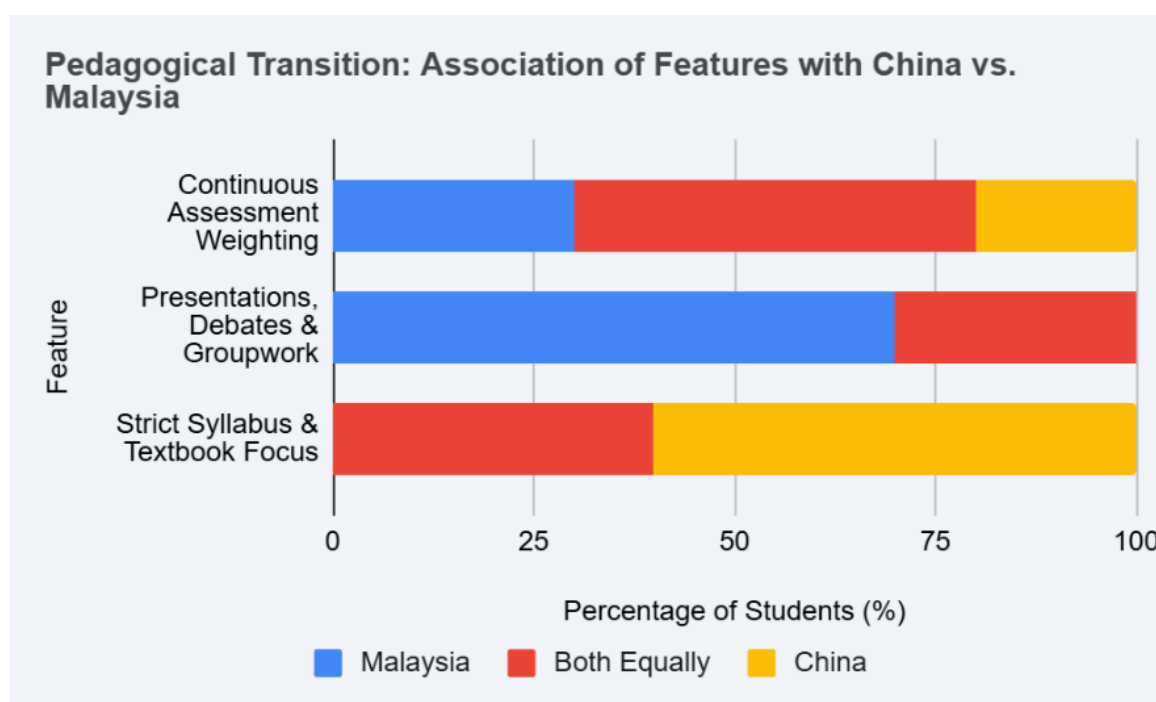
An exploratory mixed methods design combined survey analysis with thematic analysis, enabling triangulation of measurable attitudinal shifts with respondents' experiential accounts. The sample comprised 24 Chinese short-term exchange students enrolled in an international mobility programme at a Malaysian higher education institution.

Data were collected via a structured bilingual (English–Mandarin) questionnaire. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (percentages and frequencies) and non-parametric paired tests comparing pre- and post-mobility confidence. Then, open-ended responses were analysed as representative anonymised quotations.

RESULTS

Preparedness and expectations. Participants entered the programme with limited perceived preparedness for the academic demands of an English-medium, student-centred environment (Figure 1). When asked whether they felt academically prepared upon arrival to handle critical-thinking assignments in English, responses were largely neutral (41.7%), while 25.0% disagreed and 33.3% agreed or strongly agreed, indicating considerable variation in perceived readiness rather than uniformly high preparation. Although most respondents were neutral about expecting Malaysian classrooms to resemble Chinese ones (58.3%), 33.3% did expect similarities, suggesting some underestimated the pedagogical gap.

Figure 1. Initial Readiness vs. Adaptation Outcomes



Pedagogical transition (TCL to SCL). Participants characterized their home universities as teacher-centred (Figure 2). 83.3% agreed or strongly agreed that home learning emphasized teacher-centred instruction and systematic knowledge transmission, with no disagreement, and 58.3% agreed that performance in China relies heavily on final summative assessment.

Presentations, peer debate, and collaborative learning were associated with Malaysian higher education (66.7%), whereas strict syllabus coverage and textbook-focused teaching were associated with China (58.3%). Post-mobility, 75.0% agreed they had become more comfortable with interactive, student-centred learning.

Face culture. Face-related norms exerted a moderate influence. Half of the respondents were neutral regarding fear of language mistakes and losing face, while 25.0% agreed such concerns limited their participation and 25.0% disagreed. Most were also neutral about preferring respectful silence (58.3%; 25.0% agreed) and about discomfort expressing critical opinions (58.3%, 33.3% reported some discomfort). Refer Figure 3.

Figure 2. The Pedagogical Features China vs. Malaysia

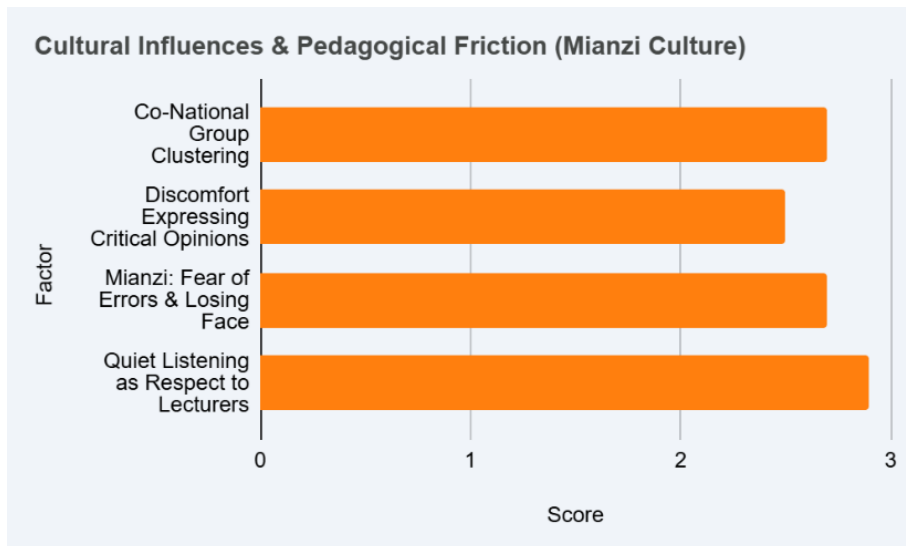


Figure 3. The Cultural Pedagogical Friction (Mianzi Culture)

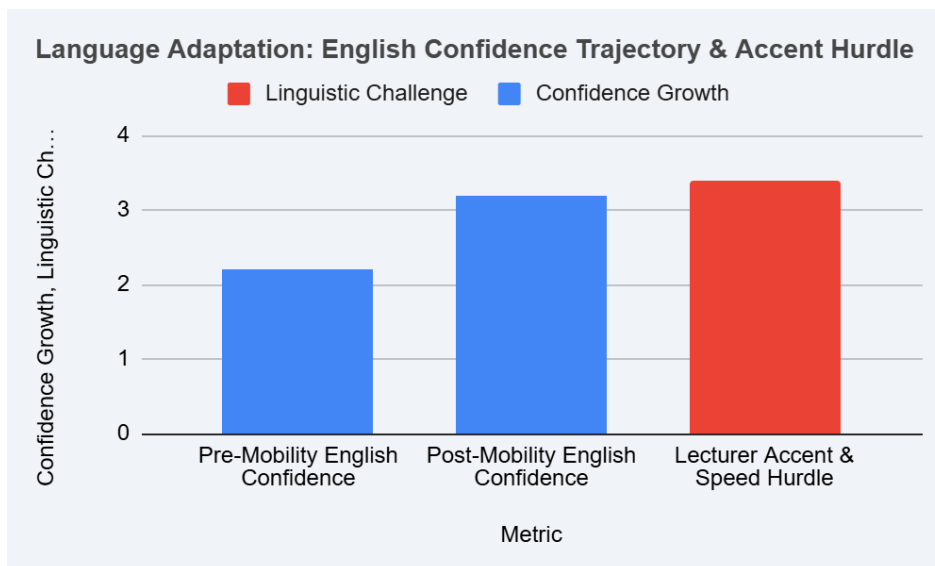
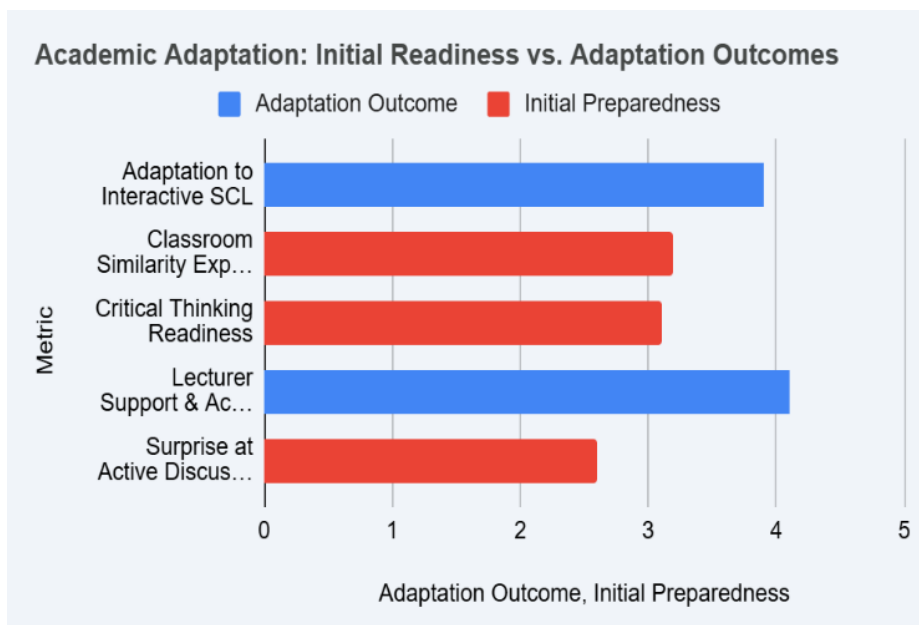


Figure 4. English Confidence Trajectory & Accent Hurdle



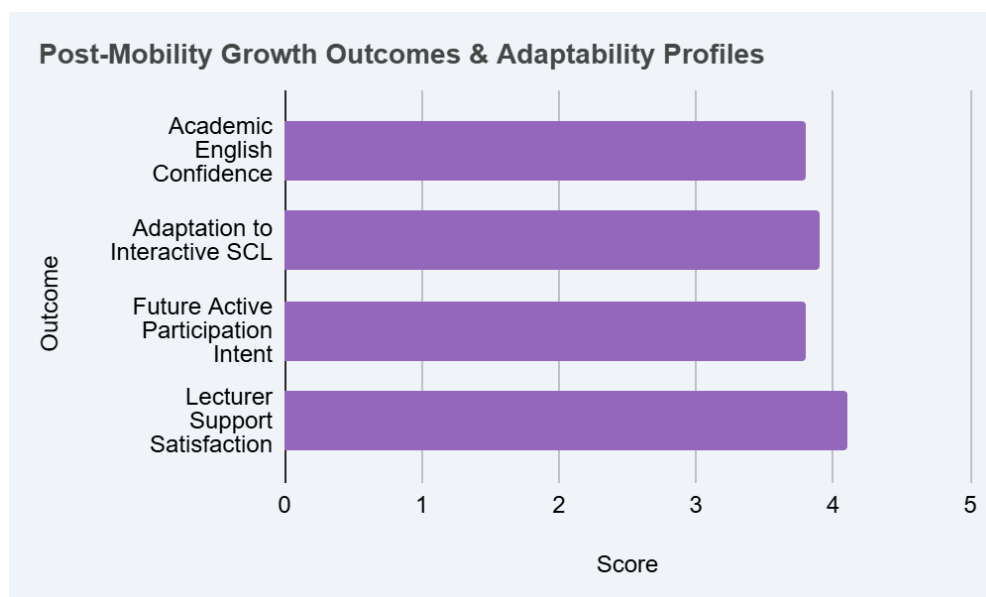
Language Challenges

Language was the most consistent obstacle: half agreed or strongly agreed that Malaysian lecturers' speaking speed and accents were harder to understand than expected. Open-ended responses confirmed this, with majority of participants concerning English communication, vocabulary, lecturer accents, and oral comprehension (Figure 4). Coping strategies centred on translation applications, peer explanations, study groups, and volunteer assistance.

Post-mobility Outcomes

Gains were most evident in speaking confidence: the proportion rating confidence low or very low fell from 58.3% before mobility to 16.7% after, while high or very high confidence rose from 8.3% to 41.7%. Additionally, 75.0% agreed they had developed greater confidence in academic English use and would participate actively from the first week of a future programme, and 83.3% agreed lecturers effectively accommodated their linguistic and cultural needs. Given the descriptive design, these findings represent self-reported perceptions rather than causal effects.

Figure 5. The Post-Mobility Profiles



DISCUSSION

The findings support the Integrated Socio-Pedagogical Adaptation as conceptual synthesis and extend it to underrepresented in the literature population. Four themes merit emphasis.

First, the results trace a transformative trajectory from teacher-centred expectations toward student-centred practice. Initial unpreparedness for critical-thinking work in English aligns with evidence that Chinese students must relearn communication styles and classroom expectations in host institutions (Heng, 2016), while the reported post-mobility comfort with interactive learning is consistent with Mezirow's account of perspective transformation following a disorienting dilemma (Calleja, 2014). Causal claims are precluded by the descriptive design, but the pattern is theoretically coherent.

Second, language constituted the principal challenge, involving not primarily grammatical competence but listening comprehension, speech rate, and accents, mirroring the EMI literature on rapid speech and non-native accents (Hellekjær, 2017; Siegel, 2020) and on accent as the dominant source of listening difficulty (Diaz & Iqbal, 2024), as well as Malaysian-specific evidence that language is Chinese students' foremost barrier (Singh & Xue, 2025). The reported coping repertoire included translation applications, peer support, study groups, and volunteer assistance. This echoes mitigation strategies such as lecture recordings and

language support documented elsewhere (Diaz & Iqbal, 2024), confirming the centrality of technology-mediated and peer-supported learning.

Third, the TCI-to-SCL transition was salient yet positively evaluated, corroborating characterizations of Chinese pedagogy as transmission-oriented and contemporary higher education as student-centred (Bhardwaj et al., 2025; Glava et al., 2024) and supporting evidence that educational system familiarity and participation are crucial to short-term adaptation (Zhang & Li, 2022). For programmes, proactive orientation to SCL conventions such as low-stakes discussion, continuous assessment, participation norms may accelerate adjustment.

Fourth, face influenced participation but did not dominate: a quarter of respondents reported face-related restrictions and preferred silence, yet the prevalence of neutral responses indicates that Mianzi operated moderately and variably. This nuance supports both the documented role of face in Chinese students' reticence (Wu, 2009; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018) and warnings against over-generalized cultural attributions, given that silence can represent strategic participation (Chung, 2021; Zhang, 2022). Finally, positive post-mobility outcomes such confidence gains, early participation intentions, and satisfaction with lecturer accommodation are consistent with evidence that short sojourns yield measurable development (Mapp, 2012; Zhang & Li, 2022) and that lecturer–student communication is critical to adjustment (Jiang et al., 2025).

LIMITATIONS.

The small, single-institution sample ($N = 24$) constrains generalizability and statistical power; all measures were self-reported, retrospective confidence ratings may carry recall bias, and the descriptive cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. The absence of comparison groups and post-programme follow-up leaves the durability of gains unknown. Future research should employ larger multi-institutional samples, longitudinal and repeated-measures designs, classroom observation, and comparative cohorts to disentangle the relative contributions of language, pedagogy, and face culture.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how language, pedagogy, and face culture shape the academic adaptation of Chinese short-term exchange students in Malaysia, providing an integrated socio-pedagogical account of their experiences. Adaptation difficulties centred on listening comprehension, lecturers' accents, and the shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, while face norms moderately influenced participation. Peer support, translation technologies, and lecturer accommodation facilitated progress; despite initial difficulties, participants reported substantial gains in academic English confidence, stronger participation willingness, and positive evaluations of the host pedagogy.

Theoretically, the study suggests the value of integrating transformative learning, face-negotiation, and ABC frameworks in non-Western mobility contexts, offering a transferable model for understanding short-term academic sojourns. Practically, receiving institutions should provide pre-arrival orientation to student-centred learning and participation expectations, discipline-specific English support, and structured peer mentoring; lecturers can facilitate adaptation through clear pronunciation, moderate pace, advance distribution of materials, and graduated low-stakes discussion; and students benefit from strategic use of peer learning, translation tools, and engagement with local students. Future research should extend this work with larger, more diverse samples; longitudinal designs tracing adaptation beyond the mobility period; and observation-based measures of participation, while comparative studies across host countries would test the model's generalizability. Ultimately, short-term academic mobility can function as a genuinely transformative learning experience when linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural support are aligned.

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