

## EXPLORING CHINESE LANGUAGE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A THAI UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract

This study aims to investigate the experiences of Chinese language students (CLS) when interacting with international students at a Thai university. As the number of international students continues to rise in higher education institutions worldwide, understanding the dynamics and challenges of cross-cultural interactions in an academic context becomes crucial. Through qualitative interviews, the study explores CLS perspectives on their interactions with international students at a Thai university. The findings revealed the advantages of interactions with international students; the impacts of cultural differences, and the communication barriers. The study concludes with implications for teacher training programs, intercultural education, and the improvement of academic collaboration within diverse learning environments.

**Keywords:** Chinese Language Students, Internationalization, International Students.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, internationalization has become increasingly important in the education sector worldwide, particularly in higher education institutions. While the term 'internationalization' was first introduced in the 1980s, its definitions and objectives have changed over time, resulting in a range of interpretations. Söderqvist (2002) and Hudzik (2014) have both suggested that internationalization is a process that offers several benefits for educational institutions, including staff, students, and all stakeholders, as it enables a better understanding of the changes that occur when institutions transition from a national to an international level. As stated, several definitions of internationalization have been proposed, but Knight's (2004) definition, which describes internationalization as a process that incorporates an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the aim of education, is widely accepted. Knight and de Wit (1997) have emphasized the importance of the 'intercultural element' in the internationalization process. As previously mentioned, internationalization has various goals, including attracting students from around the world, improving academic prestige, and achieving international rankings and standards (Teichler, 2009; de Wit et al., 2005; Townsend, 2008; Ward, 2008; Bretag et al., 2002). Universities are determined to strengthen their commitment to broad international cooperation with other institutions to gain the benefits of internationalization as well. One way universities are achieving this is by expanding the number of international students at their institutions. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported a significant increase in the number of international students studying outside their home country in 2017 (OECD, 2017). This trend demonstrates the growing importance of internationalization in the education sector and the benefits that it can offer to universities.

### 2. Internationalization of Universities

From the perspective of universities, internationalization involves improving academic quality, enhancing the experiences of students and staff, collaborating on projects with other universities, and more (Knight, 2004). According to a survey conducted by the International Association of

Universities (IAU) in 2018, universities engage in internationalization for various reasons, including improved status, graduate employment opportunities, and the development of intercultural awareness among staff and students (Marinoni et al., 2019). From the students' perspective, studying abroad can enhance their educational skills and personal development. Some students believe that studying abroad will prepare them for future employment and stable life, while others believe that studying in an internationalizing system and environment will provide them with various opportunities in several fields (Townsend & Poh, 2008). Additionally, according to Ang and Liamputtong (2007), university internationalization helps students learn about differences in cultural values, norms, and practices between their home country and others. Therefore, students have the capacity to create a new social network in their life through internationalization. Moreover, Hudzik (2014) has highlighted that students in the internationalization process demand better understanding and intercultural abilities.

Mustaffa and Ilias (2013) have emphasized that international students who wish to study in a foreign country must adapt to the unfamiliar cultural environment. As the host students at internationalizing universities, they must do so. Brown and Holloway (2008) pointed out that cultural adjustment is crucial when students, whether international or host students are learning about new cultures. According to Lee and Pistole (2014), the ability to adapt to internationalizing contexts can inspire students, both international and host, to build more confidence in social and everyday interactions. However, the degree of adaptability varies based on the students' cultural backgrounds and patterns of skill exchange (Patron, 2014; Sam & Berry, 2010). Hayden et al. (2003) and Chan (2008) have suggested that the qualities of internationalization in educational institutions could help develop students' international characteristics, such as open-mindedness, language competence, flexibility of thinking, and respect for others. This means that cultural adjustment is crucial for both international and host students in internationalizing universities, and the qualities of internationalization can help develop students' international characteristics.

## **2.1 Student's experience in internationalizing contexts**

In the context of boundlessness, according to Tubbs (2008), students in international universities always acquire new cultural experiences connected to both their "home culture" and their "host culture." In this case, the "Cultural difference" as described by Hall's Cultural Dimensions theory is important (Hall, 1990). The concept of cultural differences in high and low culture contexts, according to Hall, is crucial in determining how students learn, communicate, live, and use other learning strategies. Ward (2001) and Ward et al. (1998) stated that the ability to adapt and cope with new situations in a foreign cultural environment is closely related to the development of socio-cultural competence. As Deardorff (2006) indicated, socio-cultural competence is necessary to effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, developing socio-cultural competence is required for both international and host students to encourage challenges and opportunities presented by an internationalized learning environment.

It is important to note that research on student experiences in internationalization is a diverse field, and there are many other studies that have explored various aspects of this topic. Some examples include studies on the impact of communication barriers (Nowak and Weiland, 1998), the role of the university in supporting international students (Yusliza's. 2012), and the challenges faced by international students in navigating the academic culture at their host universities Deardorff (2006). Notably, the majority of these previous studies took place in Western settings, and the focus was mostly on student experiences of international students, less attention was devoted to the experiences of host students. Through their hosting roles, this study aims to explore CLS interactions with international students at their internationalizing universities. The research questions were suggested as follows: What are advantages of the interaction with international students, impacts of cultural differences, and communication barriers?

### 3. Methodology

This study was carried out through a qualitative technique and a content analysis of the data to explore experiences CLS perceived in the internationalization environment. There are two main research questions: (a) What benefits does CLS believe it has in interactions with international students? (b) What effects do interactions with international students provide? Mae Fah Luang University (MFU), the newest university in Thailand, was selected to be the main location of the study. The participants of this study were 32 CLS who were studying at MFU during the academic year 2021-2022. Semi-structured interviews that were performed in English were used to gather the data. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, the data obtained were analyzed using a content analysis process, then all themes that emerged were used to answer the research questions.

#### 3.1 Findings

Regarding the summary of significant data from respondents, the qualitative data were examined on the basis of the previously stated research questions. A number of interesting points on studying at a university's internationalization were discovered. These findings include insights into the perspectives of CLS on the benefits of internationalization, the impacts of cultural differences, and the communication barriers. Additionally, the study provided valuable insights into a better understanding of cultural diversity.

#### Perspectives on the advantages of Internationalization

In terms of studying at an internationalizing university, a significant number of CLS expressed their appreciation for the numerous advantages offered by internationalization. This section presents some of the key advantages highlighted by the students in the paper. Firstly, the majority of CLS emphasized the value of interacting with international students. They found these interactions to be highly beneficial as they provided opportunities to gain a comprehensive understanding of society, people, globalization, and worldwide perspectives, as well as learn from diversities. In particular, students acknowledged the strengths of individualistic cultures and developed a greater sense of consideration toward their Western friends. They believed that this experience greatly influenced their learning route and collaborative skills, positively impacting the effectiveness of their intercultural interactions. Through such diverse interactions, students can develop cross-cultural competencies in various contexts in the future.

Secondly, the friendships established with international students offered CLS a sense of social support. These friendships served as a source of companionship and understanding. The CLS, acting as hosts, acknowledged their role in providing support and empathy to international students. They demonstrated a welcoming attitude, fostering an environment for making new friends and broadening their international perspectives. Moreover, these relationships enabled them to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and frustrations faced by international students who were living far from their homes. The empathy not only allowed them to offer support to their international friends but also equipped them with the necessary skills to manage their own frustrations and adapt to the experiences of an internationalizing environment in the future.

#### Impacts of cultural differences

The interaction with international students had significant impacts on the CLS, particularly in terms of cultural differences. One notable positive impact was the exposure to various cultures, perspectives, and the development of open-mindedness. The majority of CLS appreciated

diversity experiences as they enhanced their intercultural competence. The internationalization of the university offered a wealth of opportunities for personal and academic growth for both international and host students.

The friendships formed with international students allowed CLS to reflect on their own learning processes and potentially adopt strategies for their academic success. They believed that these experiences would foster confidence and independence when entering new environments and adapting to different lifestyles. In an internationalizing university, the influence extends beyond learning about different cultures; it also exposes students to different learning styles. This situation can be supported by various studies (e.g. Yusliza, 2012; Mustaffa & Ilias, 2013; Lee & Pistole, 2014) that explain the university's internationalization serves as a learning platform for students to acquire cultural differences and become well-adapted to an internationalized world through the process of internationalization.

### **The communication barriers**

While the internationalization of the university brings various advantages for CLS students, it is important to acknowledge that they may also face pressure and frustration due to communication barriers. CLS, in their role as hosts, are aware of these challenges and attempt to provide support and understanding to international students. However, in the context of the interactions examined in this study, CLS reported some worries while communicating in English. They frequently encountered confusion and experienced difficulties in accurately conveying their thoughts. The communication barriers primarily come from differences in accents and language skills between CLS and international students, particularly in terms of pronunciation. These barriers often result in misunderstandings and misinterpretations during communication. It is crucial to recognize that both sides of the conversation bring their own cultural backgrounds and perspectives, which can influence their interpretation and engagement in communication. However, these challenges did not discourage them from continuing to communicate in English and build relationships with international students. In fact, they viewed these experiences as opportunities for personal growth. The process of overcoming communication obstacles taught them important qualities such as patience and adaptability, which are crucial for functioning in a globalized environment. Moreover, CLS expressed that these challenges made them stronger and more resilient individuals. CLS acknowledges the significance of language proficiency at an internationalizing university. They recognize that English, as the international language for communication in a globalized world, is not only utilized in their academic classes but also in their day-to-day interactions with international students and during travels abroad. Also, they firmly believe that English is essential for their future careers, particularly as foreign language teachers. Consequently, this understanding serves as a strong motivation for them to actively engage in English language learning. They approach the learning process with a strong motivation and are committed to continuously enhancing their language skills in order to be better equipped for their future endeavors.

## **4. Conclusion**

This paper aims to explore the experiences of CLS with international students in their educational institutions. The study uses a qualitative methodology, analyzing interview data to gather insights into CLS students' interactions with international students and the development of their intercultural skills through these interactions. The findings highlight CLS perspectives on the benefits of internationalization, the positive impact of cultural diversity, and the lessons learned from cross-cultural communication. However, an obstacle affecting their experiences in university internationalization emerged, namely, their unfamiliarity with English language pronunciation. CLS recognized that their lack of language proficiency may have hindered their engagement with international students and limited their communication in an internationalized environment. To address this issue, it is recommended that additional English language courses be offered to

students studying in an internationalizing university. Consequently, students will be better equipped to interact with international students and derive more meaningful experiences from the process of internationalization. Moreover, these language courses can contribute to the development of intercultural competencies among students. For improving essential skills required in an internationalized environment at the university, some activities which enable students to develop cross-cultural communication skills to gain insights into global issues are recommended, they are as follows: 1) Provide opportunities for students to attend international events and seminars that involve both host and international students; 2) Offer Language and Culture Training courses to improve language skills and provide insights into different cultural perspectives; 3) Encourage students to have experiences that enhance their understanding of global cultures; 4) Create opportunities for students to cultural exchange and learning from different perspectives; 5) Establish language clubs where students can explore various dimensions of a particular language and its associated culture; 6) Encourage students to collaborate with peers from different countries through interactive global projects.

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