

**AN EXPLORATION OF ACADEMIC ADAPTATION CHALLENGES
FACED BY MAINLAND CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN
MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A
QUALITATIVE STUDY FOCUSING ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE
BARRIERS**

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the English-language difficulties encountered by mainland Chinese undergraduates at Management and Science University (MSU) in Malaysia and examines how these barriers shape academic adjustment. Ten eligible students were recruited and interviewed bilingually in English and Mandarin using a semi-structured protocol. After verbatim transcription and translation, the data were subjected to thematic analysis. The results show that limited English proficiency is a major obstacle, directly affecting students' ability to adapt academically. Language problems are intensified by contrasting teaching styles in China and Malaysia, together forming the central challenge reported by participants. Respondents traced their weak English to two sources: a scarcity of genuine communicative settings and the long-standing emphasis on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking in China's secondary English curriculum. By focusing on an Asian host country, the study addresses a gap in the literature and offers Malaysian universities empirical evidence for refining support services aimed at Chinese international students.

Keywords: English language barriers; academic adaptation; international students from mainland China; Malaysian higher education; cross-cultural teaching

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globalisation and national education policies have steered student mobility away from the once-dominant westward routes toward a more balanced, multi-directional pattern. In China, the Action Plan for Education Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (Song, 2024) singles out closer educational ties with partner countries and larger two-way student flows as central objectives, laying the policy groundwork for closer academic links with Southeast Asia. Since the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, this openness has gained further momentum. Measures such as the Ministry of Education's Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding Educational Opening in the New Era (Wan, 2020) and the Opinions on Deepening Reform of the Modern Vocational Education System (Si Chuan Newspaper, 2024) translate the goal into practice: the Humanities Exchange for World Affairs Programme and the Sino-Foreign Friendship Academies for Humanities Exchange encourage universities to

run overseas campuses, co-develop professional standards and exchange staff and students, speeding up educational integration between China and Belt and Road countries.

Malaysia, a key stop on the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, has set itself the goal of becoming a leading higher-education hub in the region. Its English-language programmes, relatively low tuition and culturally mixed campus life pull in students from abroad (Wang, 2023). Policy moves on both sides have reinforced the flow: mainland China now sends more students than any other country, with the 2023 cohort topping 80 000, turning educational links into one of the clearest channels for Belt-and-Road cultural exchange (Wang, 2024). Yet the same flow has highlighted a worrying trend—drop-out rates among Chinese undergraduates are climbing. At several public universities up to 70 per cent of first-year students fall below the required GPA in their opening semester, and 72 per cent of those who leave report that ‘classroom silence’ linked to language problems was a major factor, exposing how hard cross-cultural adjustment can be (Wang et al., 2023).

Mainland Chinese students in Malaysia face two overlapping hurdles. First, language: despite English being compulsory from primary school, the China English Education Development Report (2022) notes that classroom instruction remains exam-driven, prioritising reading and writing over listening and speaking, and offering few chances to use English in real situations. A band-6.5 IELTS result may satisfy admission, yet students still stumble over discipline-specific vocabulary, intricate academic syntax and lecturers’ varied accents, slowing lecture comprehension and weakening written work. Second, pedagogy: Chinese universities rely on teacher-led, deductive classes that stress theory transmission and solo exercises geared to final tests. Malaysian classrooms, by contrast, are student-centred and inductive, demanding group projects, open discussion and self-directed inquiry. The sudden move from a highly guided “nanny” system to a “free-range” setting forces students to negotiate both linguistic gaps and a new learning culture, producing simultaneous pressure from language barriers and pedagogical dislocation (Buchori et al., 2018).

Prior studies agree that language hurdles and divergent pedagogies are central to international students’ academic adjustment (Mao et al., 2024); all the same, systematic inquiry into Sino-Malaysian educational collaboration is still thin. Globally, scholarship on Southeast Asian mobility gravitates toward Singapore and Thailand, while work on Malaysia typically offers broad sketches of its education system. Detailed evidence on how sojourners actually experience language barriers—grasping discipline-specific English or tuning in to local accents—remains absent. Equally under-examined is how the Belt and Road education agenda reshapes students’ motives for coming and, in turn, the challenges they meet once on campus.

Most studies on Chinese international students’ adaptation have looked at Western destinations (Wang & Peng, 2025). Work on Malaysia is still scarce and suffers from three weaknesses. First, the literature is largely confined to descriptive accounts of the study-abroad landscape; it rarely uses micro-level empirical evidence to explain why dropout rates remain high. Second, existing studies tend to treat language difficulties and pedagogical differences as separate issues, leaving their interplay—such as how limited proficiency magnifies the stress of new classroom practices, or how unfamiliar teaching styles slow situated language learning—largely unexplored. Third, the field relies on narrow theoretical lenses, seldom combining communicative-competence insights on language barriers with self-efficacy perspectives on

learning adjustment, and thus offers no integrated framework for understanding adaptation problems.

Centering on mainland Chinese undergraduates at Malaysia's Management and Science University, the study maps how their English difficulties surface in academic life, traces why these problems persist, and tests whether divergences between Chinese and Malaysian classroom practices intensify or cushion the effect. By doing so, it adds the first empirical evidence on language barriers in an Asian host country and pinpoints where support services can be redesigned under Belt-and-Road higher-education partnerships. The findings also feed back into China's English curriculum and into any university aiming to raise the standard of intercultural teaching.

2.0 THEORY

2.1 Communicative Competence Theory

2.1.1 Core Theoretical Perspectives

Communicative competence theory has shifted its focus from purely linguistic knowledge to the ability to use language effectively. Rather than concentrating solely on grammatical correctness, it now integrates social appropriateness into a unified model of competence.

The theory's intellectual roots lie in Noam Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence, which treats grammar as an internal rule system and privileges how sentences are generated and parsed, leaving aside the social circumstances of speech (Christian, 2007). During the 1970s anthropologist Dale Hymes remedied this omission with 'communicative competence', insisting that language study must embed speakers in their sociocultural worlds and that proficiency entails knowing when and how to use forms appropriately, not merely obeying grammatical strictures (Courtney, 2011). A decade later, language educators Michael Cannell and Merrill Swinstone reformulated the idea, parsing communicative competence into four mutually dependent components (Aditya et al., 2024):

Grammatical competence is the command of formal linguistic rules—vocabulary, syntax, morphology, and phonetics—that underpins accuracy in language use. Sociolinguistic competence enables speakers to match language to social context, choosing the right register, observing politeness norms, and respecting cultural conventions, all of which determine whether communication is perceived as appropriate. Strategic competence comes into play when breakdowns occur: speakers keep the exchange alive by paraphrasing, repeating, or asking for help. Discourse competence, finally, is the ability to weave sentences into a coherent whole so that spoken or written texts progress logically and hang together (Benjamin, 2019).

The theory questions the long-held view that linguistic competence is nothing more than mastery of grammar. By weaving context, competence, and communicative success into a single analytical frame, it supplies a workable set of categories for pinpointing what goes wrong in actual language use. Its influence has since spread to second-language acquisition and intercultural communication, where it now serves as a central theoretical instrument.

2.1.2 Intrinsic Connection to This Study

This study zeroes in on the English-language hurdles and academic adjustment difficulties encountered by mainland Chinese students abroad. Framing the issue through communicative competence theory offers a clear way to dissect how language obstacles surface across different dimensions and how they, in turn, shape students' adaptation to academic life. These links can be traced along three distinct lines.

The four categories of language barrier phenomena identified in this study directly correspond to deficiencies in the theory's four competence dimensions:

Limited vocabulary and heavy dependence on translation software point to a deeper problem: respondents' grammar is too weak to let them write or speak independently. Without basic words or reliable command of rules, they turn to outside tools. In class discussions their views emerge imprecisely, and everyday exchanges often misfire, signs that sociolinguistic competence is shaky. They remain unfamiliar with Malaysian academic discourse—how a group discussion should be reasoned, what counts as polite across cultures—so their language sits awkwardly in context. When talk stalls, few can switch tactics; most simply reopen the translation app instead of asking for a definition or help from a peer, and the conversation collapses. Presentations that jump without logic and spoken accounts that drift from one point to another reveal discourse competence still underdeveloped: they cannot yet line up ideas in the order their discipline expects, so scholarly meaning is lost along the way.

Communicative competence theory shows how language difficulties cascade through academic life. When grammatical control is thin, written work drifts off course—misspelled terms or misused collocations appear. Limited sociolinguistic sense makes classroom exchanges awkward; students miss the nuance behind a lecturer's casual aside or culturally loaded example. A shortage of strategic tricks slows down the search for fixes, while shaky discourse skills flatten the structure of essays or presentations. Together these four shortfalls shrink participation and leave academic tasks unfinished.

Communicative competence theory offers a lens for tracing the roots of language barriers. This study pinpoints a key weakness in China's exam-oriented English instruction: under traditional pedagogy, classroom time is heavily skewed toward grammatical competence—endless reading and writing drills—while sociolinguistic competence (adapting language to context), strategic competence (negotiating meaning), and discursive competence (organising extended texts) receive comparatively little attention. The resulting proficiency profile among international students is lopsided: solid reading and writing scores coexist with underdeveloped listening, speaking, and real-world usage skills.

2.1.3 Current Application Status

Communicative competence theory now underpins a wide body of work in second-language acquisition, intercultural communication and language pedagogy, most often where the focus falls on the development of international students or English learners. Its practical uptake can be grouped into three broad settings.

Researchers often invoke this theory to unpack persistent linguistic gaps across learner cohorts. Shang (2018) used it to split the pragmatic slips of Chinese learners of English into two strands: those rooted in shaky grammar and those triggered by limited sociolinguistic know-how. He

traced both strands back to stark cultural distance and to classrooms that rarely coach pragmatic awareness. Liu (2023) extended the same lens to academic English, showing that students stumble mainly because they have little exposure to the discourse conventions of Chinese universities and because their writing lacks clear logical flow; these twin constraints now inform the shape of targeted language support.

Researchers have repeatedly turned to this theory as a yardstick for measuring teaching effectiveness. Fan (2024), for example, designed a blended model that weaves cultural content together with strategy training. When judged against the four strands of communicative competence, the model markedly sharpened international students' sociolinguistic awareness and strategic skills and eased their cross-cultural communication difficulties. In a related study, Lv (2022) introduced task-based instruction to international students' English classes; controlled comparisons showed that it outperformed traditional lessons in strengthening both strategic and discourse competence.

Problem Diagnosis in Cross-Cultural Communication Scenarios: Within cross-cultural studies, the theory is used to dissect the roots of communication breakdowns. Tong (2021), for example, tracked Chinese expatriates sent to Belt and Road projects and found that the main obstacles were not faulty grammar but a lack of sociolinguistic competence—specifically, limited familiarity with local business norms. The study therefore recommends pairing context-sensitive language training with immersive cultural experiences.

2.2 Self-Efficacy Theory

2.2.1 Theoretical Perspective

In 1977, Albert Bandura—who had already founded social-learning theory—introduced self-efficacy theory, a foundational account of why people choose certain behaviours and how well they perform them. The theory's central claim is straightforward: the stronger one's belief in personal capability, the greater the influence on action selection and exertion (Yao et al., 2025).

Bandura defined self-efficacy as the personal assessment of whether one can execute a given behaviour. According to Golnam et al. (2025), this conviction rests on perceived capability rather than objective skill. Four kinds of information shape its emergence and change:

Performance outcomes exert the most immediate influence on self-efficacy: consistent success steadily strengthens it, whereas repeated setbacks erode it. Vicarious experience arises when individuals watch others—especially peers who resemble themselves—complete tasks; seeing these comparable people succeed nurtures the conviction that one can succeed as well. Verbal persuasion covers the impact of praise, encouragement, or criticism from others. A teacher's positive feedback, for example, can raise a learner's confidence in tackling an assignment. Physiological cues reflect the bodily and emotional signals experienced during performance. Anxiety, tension, or fatigue depress self-efficacy, while a calm and confident state supports it (Leary & Matusitz, 2025).

Self-efficacy shapes behaviour by steering the tasks people choose—individuals tend to sidestep work they believe exceeds their capacity—and by setting the level of effort and persistence they invest; those who feel capable keep going when obstacles arise. It also colours

cognition and affect: lower confidence invites rumination and anxiety. The result is a looping sequence in which perceived efficacy drives performance, and performance in turn updates efficacy (Dong et al., 2025).

2.2.2 Intrinsic Connection to This Study

In this study, the academic adaptation challenges confronting international students form a self-reinforcing loop: language difficulties erode self-efficacy, which in turn deepens adaptation problems. Self-efficacy theory serves as the primary lens for unpacking how this loop takes hold, and the links unfold as follows:

The insufficient self-efficacy observed among international students in this study can be precisely explained through the theory's four categories of information sources:

Persistent negative classroom experiences—such as being unable to answer questions or repeatedly submitting work that falls short of expectations—erode students' confidence in their academic abilities. These recurring setbacks, rooted in language barriers, become the main reason their sense of self-efficacy declines.

Vicarious experiences cut both ways: a handful of respondents saw a few classmates coping well and drew slight encouragement, yet most concluded the problem was insurmountable after watching widespread struggle among their peers.

Although Malaysian lecturers' generally accommodating tone offers implicit verbal support, it rarely translates into specific encouragement or tailored guidance. For international students, language-related miscommunication—illustrated by cryptic error annotations on returned assignments—often functions as an unintended but discouraging verbal signal.

Physiological feedback intensifies the negative loop: anxiety sparked by classroom language barriers and communication stress is sustained by bodily cues that confirm the learner's fear of being unable to cope, driving efficacy down and anxiety up in a repeating cycle.

Language barriers do not block academic adaptation outright; instead, they erode students' self-efficacy, which in turn triggers withdrawal from class discussion, group work and help-seeking, thereby deepening adaptation problems. Self-efficacy thus mediates the entire process, a sequence that mirrors Bandura's chain of efficacy shaping behaviour and behaviour shaping outcomes.

The theory pinpoints where support should land: to raise self-efficacy, supply four kinds of information. Let learners rack up small, staged language wins so performance evidence grows. Show them peers who have adjusted well, giving vicarious proof that success is doable. Add focused teacher feedback and steady encouragement to keep verbal persuasion positive. Finally, give them tools to keep anxiety in check, keeping physiological signals from undermining confidence.

2.2.3 Current Application Status

In the past five years, researchers have drawn on self-efficacy theory to examine how international and university students adapt academically and what drives their motivation to learn.

Researchers have repeatedly turned to this theoretical lens to pinpoint what propels international students' academic adjustment. Ge (2021), for example, showed that task performance and supervisors' verbal encouragement were the strongest predictors for Chinese students in Japan, jointly accounting for 42.3 % of the variance in adaptation. Shen & Luo (2025) further demonstrated that language barriers shape adaptation indirectly by undermining self-efficacy; the mediated path carried an effect size of 0.31, underscoring efficacy's bridging function.

Researchers often use this theory to build chains in which antecedent variables shape self-efficacy, which in turn influences outcomes. Irang (2019), surveying undergraduates, showed that both institutional and peer support foster academic adaptation indirectly by raising self-efficacy, with peer support acting as the stronger mediator. A 2024 study added that willingness to integrate culturally tempers the link between language barriers and self-efficacy: the more students wanted to integrate, the less their confidence was undermined by language difficulties.

Studies rooted in this theory are now common. He (2025) constructed a three-pronged intervention—accumulated success episodes, peer modelling and teacher feedback—that lifted international students' academic self-efficacy by 27 % and pushed their academic-adaptation scores well above the control group. Vollmann et al. (2024) raised both self-efficacy and engagement among distance learners by combining micro-tasks that generated mastery experiences with online peer support that supplied vicarious models.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study follows a qualitative approach and collected data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that record how mainland Chinese undergraduates actually experience English-language difficulties and academic adjustment. Participants were full-time mainland Chinese undergraduates enrolled at Management and Science University (MSU) in Malaysia. Ten students were recruited by purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020); all had held undergraduate status for at least three months. The three-month threshold was set because the first quarter after arrival is widely viewed as the decisive phase in which international students negotiate a new academic environment, allowing the study to capture immediate, first-hand accounts of language obstacles and classroom adaptation.

3.2 Interview Question Design

The interview protocol began with items drawn from Zhai and Razali (2022) and was successively revised to produce a semi-structured guide. To limit language-related interference, each prompt appeared in an English–Mandarin bilingual version and passed a three-stage check: a TESL specialist reviewed wording and academic suitability, a native Chinese tutor confirmed the Mandarin rendering, and Associate Vice-Chancellor Mr Abu Bakar Razali evaluated overall coherence, jointly safeguarding the instrument's reliability and validity.

Questions were grouped into three sections covering demographic details, English-language obstacles, and academic adjustment. All recordings and transcripts were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

3.3 Data Processing

All interviews took place on Zoom, conducted bilingually and recorded in their entirety. Transcripts were prepared verbatim; Mandarin passages were translated into English only after the original wording had been checked. The material was then examined through thematic analysis—statements were coded, grouped and distilled into main and subsidiary themes so that every conclusion rests on first-hand evidence. Before fieldwork began, ethics clearance was obtained and a pilot round was run; insights from the pilot were used to tighten the interview guide and streamline the research steps.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Through thematic analysis, this study identified two core themes: English Language Barriers and Academic Adaptation. Each theme encompasses corresponding sub-themes, as detailed in the table below:

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Findings

Key-Themes	Sub-Themes	Prime Excerpts
English Language Barrier	Difficulties in Communication	R4: I ran into a language issue. On my first days here, even grabbing food was tricky; at the supermarket the cashier asked if I wanted a bag, and I had no idea what she meant. R5: I might not grasp the menu, so I'll end up picking dishes at random—and some of them will inevitably disappoint.
	Reliance on Translation Software	R2 : I will use translators to help me. R8: I just go to the PPT in advance, use translation software, and look at the Chinese translation
	Lack of Vocabulary	R2 : It's that my vocabulary is not enough to communicate in English. R10: in China I learn about many English. But when I come to Malaysia, I realized there are many words I do not know.
	Awareness about Importance of English Language	In China, we already acknowledge the value of English, since pupils start studying it in Grade 3, though the focus is mainly on reading and writing. R5: China actually believes great importance to English, but less focus on oral English, it is more exam-based.
Academic Adaptation	Pedagogical differences	China R2: More importance to theoretical knowledge in the form Malaysia R2: Classroom atmosphere in Malaysia is more free; more

<p>The Effect of Cultural Values on Academic Experience.</p>	<p>of input and written investigation.</p> <p>R4: Teachers deepen our understanding of the content by doing questions and exams; Individual task-based learning</p> <p>R8: Test oriented education R8: Open and free learning</p> <p>It hasn't affected my studies, only my mood. Winter solstice in northern China means making dumplings with family, then eating them together. My family isn't here in Malaysia, so the day still weighs on me.</p> <p>R3: In Malaysia, I never feel left out; instead, I meet many who are eager to learn about my country, and that brings me real joy.</p> <p>R4: It does not have impact on academics.</p>	<p>importance on group work and communicative skills.</p> <p>R4: Teachers put more emphasis group activities. Group task-based learning.</p> <p>R8: Test oriented education R8: Open and free learning</p>
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5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1 Multidimensional Manifestations and Causes of English Language Barriers

All ten interviewees identified English-language obstacles as the main hurdle in their first months abroad. Five recalled that even routine tasks—ordering food or buying groceries—turned awkward when simple exchanges faltered. Their accounts echo Xiao (2021), who links limited proficiency to lower self-confidence, muted class participation and under-developed listening and speaking skills. As Ahari et al. (2019) also note, such deficits curb dialogue with instructors and local classmates, clouding course expectations and assignment guidelines.

Translation software has become the default solution for international students facing language barriers: four out of five respondents turn to it regularly to communicate and study. Although these tools speed up learning and make word searches effortless (Yang et al., 2023), they fall short on accuracy and can breed dependence, eroding students' drive to learn independently (Yang et al., 2023). At root, the pattern reveals a cognitive habit of processing the second language through the mother tongue (Cun & Mcvee, 2022). Some learners, for example, render English assignment prompts into Mandarin, draft the work in Mandarin, and only then translate the result back into English. Such detours block the steady gains in proficiency that direct engagement would bring.

Vocabulary shortfall remains a central obstacle in language learning: four out of five surveyed learners report that an insufficient lexicon hampers their ability to communicate effectively. Lexical breadth is a reliable proxy for overall proficiency, shaping how well speakers follow oral exchanges and make sense of written material (Viera, 2016). Communicative approaches

to second-language development stress grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, yet both depend on a solid stock of words (Bagarić, 2007). For mainland Chinese students abroad, the chief problem is limited contact with authentic English. Because second-language vocabulary normally expands through purposeful social use (Viera, 2016), the absence of such interaction in domestic classrooms leaves a clear gap.

Domestic English teaching tilts sharply toward exams, drilling reading and writing while leaving listening and speaking largely untouched. Students arrive in Malaysia literate yet tongue-tied, their strong test scores masking the oral and aural gaps that seminars and lectures immediately expose.

5.2 Core Challenges in Academic Adaptation and Cultural Compatibility

Teaching-method gaps between China and Malaysia are the main barrier to Chinese students' academic adjustment. In mainland classrooms the teacher dominates: students listen, memorise and rarely question, a habit reinforced by a culture that prizes quiet absorption over discussion (Zhu and O'Sullivan, 2020). Malaysian lecturers, by contrast, run student-centred sessions built on induction, group tasks and hands-on work that train learners to co-create knowledge and to practise collaboration, innovation and critique (Kassim, 2014). The sudden switch from passive reception to active inquiry produces an 'educational shock' that leaves many newly arrived mainland students unprepared, dragging down both grades and their broader learning experience (Xiao, 2021).

Cultural values did not, on their own, diminish students' academic experiences. Participants repeatedly highlighted Malaysia's inclusive climate, noting local curiosity about Chinese traditions and an absence of exclusion. Still, cultural distance could stir emotional strain—homesickness during festivals being the clearest example. These feelings did not translate into lower grades, yet they could quietly unsettle the focus needed for study.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Research Findings

By interviewing ten mainland Chinese undergraduates at Universiti Sains Malaysia, this study shows that English-language hurdles—trouble following lectures, heavy dependence on translation apps, thin vocabulary, and weak listening and speaking—together with mismatches between Chinese and Malaysian classroom practices, sit at the heart of academic adjustment. These two sets of pressures feed on each other, sharply raising stress during the first semester abroad. The linguistic gap traces back to exam-driven English instruction in China and the near absence of real-life communication opportunities, while the new teaching style expects students to speak up rather than silently receive knowledge, a shift that magnifies every shortfall in language ability. Cultural values do not touch grades directly, yet they colour students' emotions and, in doing so, quietly shape how smoothly adaptation unfolds.

6.2 Research Limitations

The sample size is small (10 participants) and confined to a single institution, limiting the generalisability of findings;

Individual variables such as disciplinary differences and prior language proficiency were not accounted for in the analysis;

The cross-sectional study design precludes tracking long-term trends in language proficiency and academic adaptation among international students.

6.3 Research Directions

Subsequent studies could widen the sample to include international students enrolled at several Malaysian universities, spanning different fields and stages of their overseas programmes. Introducing quantitative techniques would allow researchers to model how language obstacles and contrasting teaching styles shape academic adjustment. Attention might also turn to the mechanisms through which reliance on translation software affects long-term language proficiency. Comparing how mainland Chinese students adapt in other Asian host countries—Singapore or Japan, for instance—would yield fuller evidence for refining international education policy.

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