Overcoming Linguistic and Cultural Barriers to Student/Staff Communication in International Higher Education: Chinese Students' Experience and Preferences

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Abstract: *This study examines the communication preferences of Chinese undergraduates in an international university program in China, focusing on the role of language, culture, and communication tools in interactions with foreign staff. Based on semi-structured interviews with 14 students, the research investigates three main questions: how students prefer to communicate with foreign staff (either face-to-face or digitally), perceived differences between the communication style of local and foreign staff, and strategies students use to overcome linguistic barriers. Findings indicate a clear preference for face-to-face communication, valued for its potential to enhance language skills, build rapport, and make use of non-verbal cues. Despite this preference, digital communication is still widely used due to its convenience and embedded translation features, which help bridge language gaps. Students reported differences in communication style between foreign and local staff, with foreign teachers generally perceived as more informal and approachable. The study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive communication and offers recommendations for enhancing student-staff interactions, such as encouraging foreign staff to familiarize themselves with Chinese educational norms and using digital tools to support communication. This research provides valuable insights for improving communication strategies in international educational settings.*

Keywords: *Cross-Cultural Communication; International Higher Education; Qualitative Research; Chinese Undergraduates; Digital Communication Tools*

Introduction

The substantial number of Chinese students pursuing international education 'at home' at institutions in China raises significant questions about teaching methods, course design, and communication between students and staff. Central to the offering of international higher education is exposure to international staff and course content, and the promise to serve two functions: enhancing graduates' competitiveness in a globalised employment marketplace and developing 'global citizens' that understand intercultural discourse and communication (Harrison, 2015). While the 'Internationalisation at Home' (IAH) agenda is often associated with English-medium instruction (EMI), there are important distinctions between communicative competence in English and genuinely internationalised curricula, teaching and learning. Garner (2024), analysing the Japanese context, has shown that EMI can serve as a proxy for internationalisation, with limited attention paid to fostering genuine intercultural pedagogy. As noted by Healey (2015), foreign universities operating satellite campuses in China are motivated in part by the lucrative economic rewards of such international

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expansion, rather than specific government policy or the novel pedagogical possibilities of IAH. Students' ability to communicate effectively with foreign staff in these settings is essential to their academic and linguistic development. This study draws on findings from in-depth qualitative interviews with Chinese undergraduates attending an international department to explore how students communicate with foreign staff, responding to the linguistic, cultural and social factors that inform these exchanges.

Several studies have outlined the challenges of effective curriculum design and teaching practice at international universities; however, there is limited focused discussion of how students use direct communication with staff to address issues not directly related to teaching content (Che, 2023; Noman et al., 2023; Hu, 2019). This article seeks to acknowledge the pastoral and supportive role of academic staff in the international university setting, which can involve extra-curricular communication around cultural issues and international mobility. The ubiquity of digital communication, through platforms including WeChat and QQ Messenger, in China, alongside online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerated the adoption of digital or blended communication between staff and students (Jiang et al.,2022; Lin, Wen, Ching & Huang, 2021). Given the substantial differences between Chinese and Western academic models at both K-12 and university levels, analysing the preferences of students attending international courses in China provides valuable insights into current obstacles and possible future innovations in student-staff communication.

This research draws on semi-structured interviews with fourteen second and third-year students enrolled at an international department in a Chinese university. Students' reflections reveal a range of perspectives and strategies for effective communication with foreign staff and provide valuable insights into preferred methods of information sharing, asking questions, and engaging with staff outside of scheduled teaching periods. Interviewees touched on the perceived differences in communication style between Chinese and foreign staff, proposed strategies for managing English language proficiency, and discussed a range of cultural, pedagogical and linguistic issues. Following a review of related literature in the field and introduction of the theoretical framework of internationalisation at home, this article presents and discusses the main findings from the interview study, before suggesting possible implications for the broader field of international education in China.

This project seeks to address three primary research questions. Firstly, how do Chinese students prefer to communicate with foreign staff—using face-to-face or digital means? Secondly, what are the main differences that students perceive between the communication styles of foreign and local teachers? Finally, how do students overcome linguistic challenges to achieve effective communication with foreign staff?

Literature Review

The Development of International Higher Education in China

The appetite for international higher education in China has remained steady since the country began establishing various forms of cooperative and foreign-influenced university projects under a 1995 policy announced by the State Education Commission (Huang, 2003). The preceding history of higher education in China was influenced by universities founded by the European colonial powers at the turn of the twentieth century, the Soviet education model during the early years of the People's Republic after 1949, and a return to a truly international outlook after the period of 'reform and opening up' ushered in by premier Deng Xiaoping in 1978 (Huang, 2003; Chen, 2011). Since 1995, both Chinese and foreign universities have sought to leverage the promise of an international education to recruit from the massive pool of undergraduates through the establishment of various institutions, departments and courses. Academic discussion of international higher education in China has tracked its rapid development, exploring the pedagogy, demographics and business dimensions of international universities (Knight 2011; Healey 2015; De Wit 2020; Li 2020; Wilkins 2020; Yang & Wu 2021).

International education institutions in China are a diverse group, shaped by national (both in China and the country of origin of the partner institution), provincial and unique institutional conditions (Knight, 2015). They can be loosely organised into university-level partnerships, institute-level arrangements hosted at a Chinese university, and degree-level courses accredited or recognised by a foreign university but without substantial institutional involvement (Lu, 2018; Yang & Wu, 2021). Many affluent Chinese students and their families (who exert substantial influence in university choice) consider international education, either 'at home' through attendance at an international university or course located in China, or through study abroad, to be a mark of educational excellence (Xu, 2023; Wilkins, 2020; Wright, Ma & Auld 2022). The competitive marketplace of higher education in China has contributed to neoliberal trends among international courses and universities, where perceived economic benefits for students manifest in high tuition fees that make them socially exclusive (Lai & Jung, 2023). The marketisation of such courses, built upon a foundation of English-language instruction, raises questions over the genuine commitment to IAH alongside intense competition and economic pressure. The current study was conducted within an institution running a cooperative programme with a '2+2' structure, in which students can transfer credit earned during two years of study in China to complete the remaining two years of their course at an American partner university.

Overcoming Cultural Differences in International Higher Education

The dominant role of Western partners in the development of international higher education in China has raised questions over the neocolonial dimensions of these institutions, in particular the risk of uncritically reproducing notions of Western intellectual and cultural superiority (Xu 2021; Shahjahan & Edwards 2021; Bamberger & Morris 2023). Conforming to the objectives of the Chinese Ministry of Education to encourage English language proficiency, international universities focus on the use of English as the medium of instruction (EMI). This has resulted in challenges for local instructors and staff working in their non-native language, and students for whom English proficiency limits their ability to engage in class, leading in some cases to reduced complexity in learning tasks (Hu, 2019).

Cultural challenges are mediated by specific local factors, with key issues including the distinct pedagogical traditions of Chinese and Western universities that focus on rigid hierarchies or more collaborative teaching respectively (Zhang-Wu, 2018). The pedagogy of some international staff can strike Chinese students as 'intimidating and confusing,' emphasising the need to develop carefully structured learning environments in which students and staff feel confident to participate and express themselves (Noman et. al 2023, p. 6; Cheng & Fox, 2008). A key factor in the promotion of international higher education in China is the presence of foreign teaching staff, the use of English, and the perceived benefits of exposure (albeit 'at home') to an international education. Research has found that this enthusiasm is not always shared by international staff, who have on occasion required financial incentives to accept time-limited secondments to Chinese partner universities, leading to an underdeveloped sense of institutional loyalty and lack of staffing continuity (Feng, 2013; Li et al., 2016).

The present study contributes to this body of scholarship on international higher education in China, paying particular attention to the student/staff communication occurring between scheduled teaching interactions in the classroom or lecture theatre. Examining students' experiences of communicating with foreign staff places their views and impressions at the centre of analysis, providing a valuable opportunity to understand how international higher education is received and negotiated.

Theoretical Framework: Internationalisation at Home

This research is situated within the theoretical framework of internationalisation at home (IAH), first outlined in a position paper in 2000 by members of the European Association of International

Education. Initially developed in Europe, where study abroad programmes such as ERASMUS were introduced during the 1980s, IAH sought to offer the benefits of international study to non-mobile students (Crowther, 2000; Beelen & Jones, 2015). More than two decades later, Guo (2023, p. 135) provided an elegant definition of IAH as the 'purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments'.

The promotion of international mobility in higher education within the European Union obliged universities to consider how best to prepare students, staff and curricula for an internationally diverse educational community (Wächter, 2000; Beelen & Jones, 2015). The ideal relations between students and staff in the 'international classroom' were outlined in the position paper by Teekens (2000, p. 30) as acknowledging the cultural differences and conditioning that arise through exposure to distinct and diverse educational cultures. Otten (2000) highlighted the need for institutions to promote sensitivity and intercultural awareness among staff and students, including pedagogies that are responsive to different educational traditions and backgrounds. Nilsson (2000) suggested how internationalising the curriculum provides an important opportunity for students who are not internationally mobile to be exposed to international subject matter, pedagogy, and cultural influences. Following two decades of implementation, Borghetti and Zanoni (2020) posited that effective IAH requires systematic embedding across the range of academic and pastoral functions of the university to support both staff and students.

In a review of developments in IAH research, Harrison (2015) discussed the key trends and challenges that have evolved in the field since the publication of the position paper. Studies in the area of internationally diverse student populations reveal such spaces did not necessarily result in the 'transformative experiences' that IAH strives for, while internationalised curricula tend to fall within either a marketized paradigm of preparing students for the global employment market or encouraging more humanistic notions of becoming 'global citizens' (Harrison 2015, pp. 11, 14). Culturally-sensitive teaching was found to be closely connected to the language of instruction in internationalised university courses, conferring substantial advantages on students with either native speaker or strong spoken proficiency in the language of instruction. Language of instruction also introduced challenges for staff who are not proficient in English (the dominant language of instruction), which can lead both staff and students to avoid engaging with such courses (Borghetti & Zanoni, 2020).

Recent research in East Asia has highlighted the limitations of equating IaH with English language instruction. Garner (2024), in his critique of Japanese EMI programmes, argued that without the integration of international perspectives into the formal, informal, and hidden curricula, EMI becomes an instrumental strategy rather than a genuinely transformative one. This perspective is pertinent to the discussion of China, where similar top-down policies risk marginalising students' lived experiences. Certain academic fields are more closely associated with the goals and strategies of IAH, perhaps most notably language teaching. Zhang et al. (2019) outlined the importance of connecting themes of internationalisation in university English teaching in the Chinese context, in order to develop students' intercultural competence and practical linguistic skills. IAH supports such goals through curriculum design that provides opportunities for language practice with native-speaker peers.

The current study focuses on communication between staff and students to find examples of (and opportunities to improve) culturally-sensitive interactions across a diverse academic community, and places particular emphasis on the potential for digital communication to mitigate entrenched barriers to effective communication.

Methodology

A semi-structured interview methodology was chosen for this study to give participants an opportunity to express their perspectives within a framework that allowed recurring themes to

emerge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Bryman, 2016). Thematic analysis was then employed as the method for identifying and interpreting patterns across the dataset. Clarke and Braun (2017) outline how thematic analysis functions as a theoretically agnostic tool that is highly adaptable. In this study, it served as an interpretive framework for exploring participants' subjective experiences of cross-cultural communication. An inductive approach was taken, allowing codes and themes to emerge organically from the data, aligning with Clarke and Braun's emphasis on flexible, iterative engagement with participants' accounts, enabling the analysis to remain grounded in lived experience. The adaptable nature of semi-structured interviews offers participants freedom to shape and direct topics in response to their unique personal experiences (Galletta, 2013). This qualitative research method is well-suited to capturing the complex social phenomena of educational institutions and has been used to develop nuanced understandings of how students experience their learning environment (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Participants were recruited via purposive sampling, and the interview prompts were piloted with two Chinese colleagues prior to the main interviews to assess clarity and cultural appropriateness. These pilots led to minor adjustments in the phrasing of questions to ensure that students felt comfortable sharing their experiences. The sample for this study consisted of 14 undergraduates enrolled in the 'USA programme' of a mid-ranking Chinese university. As part of this programme, students take a range of courses taught in English by international staff and can apply for a '2+2' pathway that allows them to transfer credit earned in China to an American partner university (see Appendix A). The interview location was an academic office at the university, a familiar setting for students that offered a private space for uninterrupted conversation and enabled high- quality audio recording (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2018). Two interviews were conducted jointly with two participants at the request of the students (who were close friends), and one student chose to submit written responses. Interviews were conducted during May 2024, and participants were selected from both second and third-year cohorts. The sample included seven male and seven female students, and five students had confirmed plans to study abroad. This purposive sampling was used to include students at different stages of study and with different academic goals, ensuring a range of perspectives were accessed (Palinkas et al., 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Students were provided with a consent form detailing the research objectives and outlining the expectations for participation.

The interview questionnaire was shared with students in English and Chinese prior to the interview date (see Appendix B). Interviews lasted between 40–60 minutes and were conducted in English, though participants occasionally code-switched into Chinese when needed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim shortly after completion, allowing for familiarisation with the content and early theme identification (Bailey, 2008). The sample size of fourteen interviews was considered suitable for manual coding, during which general themes were identified and passages of text were assigned codes to assist with grouping and analysis (Saldaña, 2013). Coding was used to convert a significant body of text (interview transcripts) into a manageable format for analysis and presentation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Participants were invited to review their transcripts to confirm accuracy and clarify meaning in order to support the robustness of the data.

The positionality of the researcher as a member of the teaching staff at the university makes this study an example of 'insider research,' with implications including a potential for deeper empathy and rapport with participants alongside the possible distorting influence of institutional power and authority dynamics (Mercer, 2007). The students had a prior student/teacher relationship with the interviewer and were therefore potentially influenced to provide responses, especially on their views about foreign staff, that were positive or measured in their criticism (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). In spite of these limitations of such insider research, the benefits of having a deep understanding of context and familiarity with participants also afforded access and insights less readily available to institutional outsiders (Sikes & Potts, 2008).

Results

The fourteen interview participants shared their views on a range of issues related to communication with foreign teaching staff. These were coded into three main categories: the perceived advantages of face-to-face and digital communication; differences in communication style between Chinese and foreign teaching staff; and strategies and advice to overcome common obstacles to effective communication.

Advantages of Face-to-Face and Digital Communication

The majority (9/14) of participants stated their unqualified preference for face-to-face over digital communication with foreign staff. Reasons for this varied between students, and included the value attached to opportunities for conversing with native English speakers, building relationships with staff in a natural way, and having the chance to use body language and nonverbal cues to make up for limited linguistic ability. Several participants said they viewed face-to-face communication as a chance to practice their English language skills as well as answer a specific question about their studies. Student 1 said the benefits of such interactions are multifaceted: "*the one side is you can show problems, the other side is you can practice your English skills with the foreigners*," while Student 12 described how "*English is kind of my hobby, so I think talking with foreign teachers can somehow improve my oral language*." Students also value the opportunity to establish a closer relationship with foreign staff through talking face-to-face, especially participants with good English proficiency planning to study abroad, such as Student 5, Student 6 and Student 10. A final recurring explanation for students' preference for face-to-face communication was the ability to use non-verbal cues to make up for language deficiencies. Student 4 stated that communicating in person helps "*understand teachers' expressions and emotions, and avoid misunderstandings by reading their body language and expression*," Student 7 stated that she can "*directly see the teacher's facial expression and body movement to let me know her or his feelings directly*" when talking with foreign staff face-to face.

A minority of students interviewed (3/14) stated an unqualified preference for communicating with foreign staff using a digital platform (QQ Messenger); however, participants with both preferences shared a range of perceived benefits of this form of communication. Key advantages of digital communication include the availability of translation tools, convenience, and easy access to messages, as well as the suitability of digital messaging for sharing course materials and more detailed notices and updates. Students across a range of English language proficiency levels stated that the embedded translation functionality within the messenger app was a key benefit. Student 1 stated that "*when we use the phone we can translate what I want to ask more correctly, [so that] maybe the teachers will not misunderstand my questions,*" Student 3 said that for "*students like me, our oral English is not very well, so maybe we talk with you, to use QQ or Weixin we can have help from the app to translate clearly to express our thoughts*." Easy access to machine translation was also acknowledged by some students as having a potentially negative impact, Student 6 felt that "*students can translate Chinese to English so they can rely on QQ, but I think it's also a disadvantage because most of the students they don't think – they just rely on the translation app*." Student 7 shared her technique for using the translation tools first to check what she wanted to communicate with the teacher, then recorded and sent a voice message in English as another form of practice. Student 11, Student 13 and Student 14 all found that as well as access to machine translation, the ability to reflect on messages from foreign staff in their own time (rather than in a face-to-face conversation) was a valued aspect of digital communication.

Participants also reflected on how they used the functionality offered by the messenger platform to enhance their communication with foreign staff. Addressing perceived linguistic limitations, Student 3 shared that they could "*send some emoji to increase my emotion,*" while Student 13 "*use[s] a lot of emojis and stickers to express my emotion*" when communicating using QQ. For Student 5, this form of communication helps to create a sense of interacting with foreign teachers "*like friends.*" Students also appreciated the functionality of the platform that enabled sharing of course materials,

and as a permanent record of detailed written notices or instructions. Student 9 reflected that when staff "*directly put learning materials and related topics on QQ, [it] also gives foreign language learners time to reflect*," and Student 4 noted that "*face to face maybe I will ignore some detailed information, in this case I think QQ is maybe more efficient.*"

Differences between Chinese and Foreign Teachers' Communication

Participants reflected on a number of differences when communicating with foreign and Chinese staff. These were sometimes related to a feeling of contrasting cultural norms around respect, the different priorities of staff, and topics of conversation considered suitable. Student 3 found that her limited English proficiency influenced the formality of her communication with foreign staff, reflecting that she would always use the "*您[nín– the formal form for 'you']*" form when speaking with Chinese teachers, while Student 10 expressed that "*talking to a foreign teacher is more like talking to a friend, because I don't know a lot of very professional or some formal words, so maybe I would just use the informal words,*" whereas when communicating with Chinese staff in their native language, it was easier to "*尊重老师 ["show respect/deference to teacher"] like this, the situation is more formal*." Student 3 felt this was connected to the sense that in China, "*teacher and student are not actually to be friends, our culture teaches us we should respect teachers*" and gave an example,

> *"[if] our Chinese teacher has an interview, like you, they will decide a time themselves and to ask me to go at that time to see them – they will not ask 'do you have time, can you come here?'"*

This impression was shared by Student 7, who stated that, especially compared with student/teacher relationships during K12 education, "*the sense of distance is narrowing*" when communicating with teachers, although "*Chinese teachers often do downward communication with you.*"

Foreign teachers' communication style was felt by several participants to be more informal, both in style and in terms of the topics of conversation. Student 12 shared his impression that,

> *"Chinese teachers will tend to accept the image that they are the teacher, so you have to respect them and they are most of the time serious, for the major[ity] part of the Chinese teachers, I can't say all of them – some of them are very nice and friendly - I think for most of the foreign teachers working in Chinese colleges I think they are more friendly and give students a casual sense when talking with them."*

By way of example he suggested that "*Chinese teachers seldom share their daily life, personal life, they show a clear level between teachers and students*." Student 6 described foreign staff as "*more active than Chinese teachers*", a view shared by Student 11 who expanded that "*foreign teachers always pay attention to the views of students and encourage questions… Chinese teachers pay more attention to the textbook in class, to traditional education*." It is important to note that not all participants felt there was a meaningful difference in communication style influenced by the local or foreign background of the teacher, Student 1 stated that in her experience communication style is "*related to the teachers, not related to the nation*," and Student 6 felt that it "*depends on the teacher themselves, it is not about whether the teacher is Chinese or a foreigner.*"

Strategies and Advice for Effective Communication

Interview participants were asked about overcoming linguistic obstacles to effective communication with foreign staff, and to share any advice they might give to new staff or students joining the department. Students shared some sources of frustration at barriers to clear communication, even when using translation tools, such as Student 1 who found that on occasion "*the translator [app] will translate weird - it is hard to understand, because the AI can't translate perfectly,*" and Student

8, who stated that "*some students may be frustrated, I think yeah because they think 'I don't know this word' or 'I don't know how to express the sentence.*'" Nonetheless, most students felt that communicating in L2 (second language) was still worth the effort: Student 1 felt that "*when you talk with people from other countries it may be more respectful to use the other person's language*," Student 5 described feeling "l*imited if some question is complicated, but I won't feel very upset because I think everyone is very nice and kind to me*." Student 7 shared a story of helping a foreign member of staff who was caught in a downpour on campus without an umbrella, she went to share her own umbrella and make conversation with the teacher, but encountered problems: "*I think I made a lot of mistakes, I'm not very confident. I'm not sure whether the teacher had a good idea of what I wanted to tell her, my meaning – it was a little frustrating for me*."

Students were asked about their impression of foreign staff who used (or attempted to use) Chinese to communicate with them, which led several students to reflect on their impression of foreigners' attitudes towards Chinese culture and language. Responses were overwhelmingly positive towards foreign staff who attempted to learn Chinese. Student 1 shared that "*the first impression is that this teacher respects our culture*," Student 2 described feeling "*amazed*" the first time she heard a foreign teacher speak Chinese. Student 3 mentions:

> *"I think foreign teachers knowing some Chinese is better, because they give a feeling to students that 'I want to know about your language'… Chinese students will believe that this teacher is studying Chinese, this is a very sincere thing, because we know that for foreigners, studying Chinese is very difficult."*

Student 7 felt that knowing a foreign teacher was learning Chinese created a sense of empathy, "*you [i.e. the foreign staff member] think our language is good, you think our culture is good and nice, so you try to learn, to know more about our culture. We are together, we have a common sense, I think it is really nice*."

Foreign members of staff learning some simple Chinese vocabulary was one of the pieces of advice students shared to boost overall communication effectiveness. Student 10 felt that foreign staff using some "*easy Chinese words*" would help students feel less nervous, and Student 13 also noted that "*if a foreign teacher wants to have good communication maybe first they need to get some Chinese background, culture, Chinese people's habits.*" Student 6 and Student 7 also valued "*patience*" and "*friendliness*" in foreign staff, and advised gaining familiarity with Chinese apps such as QQ and WeChat to support multi-channel communication with students. Interview participants' main piece of advice for their peers, especially those with limited prior experience working with foreign teachers, was to build confidence in listening to native-speaker language through watching TV and movies, and also to make use of translation apps to help prepare for face-to-face communication with teachers.

Discussion

The main findings emerging from students' testimony can be organised into three sections: use of machine translation during digital communication; a perception that interactions with foreign staff were more informal and less influenced by Chinese cultural norms than those with local staff; and frustration around linguistic ability despite a preference for face-to-face communication.

Addressing the first research question relating to students' preferred method of communication, interview participants across gender, stage of study and level of linguistic ability shared that they commonly use machine translation features embedded within the digital messenger app to communicate with foreign staff. Translation apps have been found to improve communication between dual language learners and teachers, as they are user-friendly, provide an immediate solution to communication obstacles and give students confidence (Lake & Beisly, 2019). As some students pointed out, machine translation nonetheless remains an imperfect resource that can sometimes

cause or exacerbate misunderstandings. Recent research suggests that machine translation can struggle in areas such as idiomatic expression or complex linguistic structures, a consideration pertinent to this study as communication via messenger app often includes informal and abbreviated language (Ducar & Schocket, 2018). Interview testimony indicated that even students with a high level of English proficiency regularly use machine translation out of convenience or to 'check' their understanding. Studies suggest that there is a clear place for machine translation to support language learning; however, it is important to avoid students developing a dependence on these tools that could limit independent language skills (Chandra & Yuyun). Students also described how they use additional functionality within the apps, such as sending emojis, to help make themselves understood to foreign staff, and appreciated the use of digital communication for important notices and documents that could be easily translated, accessed at their convenience, and revisited multiple times.

Responding to the second research question, relating to perceived differences in communication style between local and foreign staff, interview testimony revealed a number of perspectives around how cultural background influenced discussion. Several students felt that their communication with foreign staff was more informal, linked to their grounding in traditional Chinese teacher/student roles. The tone of these communications was also felt by some participants to be linked to their linguistic ability: they felt they were unable to communicate with the same level of formality and respect in English as they used in their native language. Exposure to different academic cultures is one of the fundamental benefits of internationalisation at home, where students and staff reflect on pedagogy in light of an internationally diverse learning environment (Teekens, 2000). The experiences of several students appeared to support the common theme in the literature that identifies a more hierarchical dynamic in the traditional Chinese educational model, whereas Western staff encourage more collaborative and less rigid academic relationships (Zhang-Wu, 2018). A number of students described using the messenger app to communicate with foreign staff in a friendly manner, indicating that this channel of communication is a valued source of information about foreign culture.

With regard to the final research question, of how linguistic challenges to effective communication can be overcome, interviewees indicated the perceived importance of English language proficiency for effective communication with foreign staff. The challenge of managing limited language proficiency, and varying levels of English in the same cohort, has been found to undermine both student engagement in class and the complexity of assigned learning tasks (Hu, 2019). Perceived linguistic inadequacy is a major limiting factor in both staff and student engagement with internationalisation at home projects, and frustrations around communication in English can undermine engagement with key IAH goals (Borghetti & Zanoni, 2020). The majority of students stated a preference for face-to-face over digital communication with foreign staff, despite describing frustrations encountered due to linguistic obstacles. Overwhelmingly, students felt that friendliness and an accepting attitude towards such challenges from foreign staff encouraged them to persist with face-to-face communication.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study indicates that students on an international university course value communication with foreign staff in diverse ways. Those with greater English proficiency particularly enjoy face-to-face interactions, both to practise language skills and to build intercultural understanding. At the same time, digital platforms offer vital scaffolding for students facing linguistic challenges, notably through translation tools, voice notes, emojis, and file-sharing features. These findings respond to the first and third research questions, concerning students' communication preferences and the strategies they use to overcome linguistic barriers.

These findings have implications for understanding staff/student communication in international universities and the division of labour between foreign and local staff. Local students and foreign staff frequently characterise international education in China as a significant exporter of study abroad

students, but this traffic is mostly one-way (Altbach & Knight, 2007). As a result, the aspirations for international diversity central to IAH mainly occur on a native student/foreign staff binary. Students' feelings of informality and friendliness suggest foreign staff occupy a dual function as both academics and cultural ambassadors, while local staff occupy a more formal, traditional position of authority. This dynamic may unintentionally reinforce hierarchical perceptions of linguistic or cultural superiority, a concern echoed in wider critiques of international higher education (Bamberger & Morris, 2023). Linguistic asymmetries also place additional burdens on local staff, who absorb responsibility for more complex or emotionally charged student issues. These findings address the second research question regarding students' perceptions of communication styles among foreign and local staff.

From a policy perspective, this study highlights the need for institutions to move beyond equating internationalisation with English-language teaching, and instead to foster communication practices that support meaningful intercultural engagement. As Garner (2024) argued in the Japanese context, pedagogical internationalisation is not achieved through linguistic intelligibility alone, but through sustained, reciprocal interaction across cultural boundaries. In Chinese institutions, this requires coordinated efforts to equip both staff and students with the tools to navigate intercultural communication effectively, whether face-to-face or through digital platforms. Institutions should support foreign staff in understanding local educational norms and communication expectations, while also encouraging greater collaboration between foreign and Chinese colleagues to manage student support. Establishing clearer expectations around digital communication, particularly in environments where messaging apps are ubiquitous, can help reduce miscommunication and unequal burdens on staff. Ultimately, internationalisation at home must be embedded not only in curriculum design but in the everyday communicative practices that shape students' experiences of higher education.

The findings outlined in this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the research draws on a relatively small sample of fourteen students, selected purposively at a mid-ranking Chinese university operating an international programme. While this allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Rather, they offer contextually situated insights into a specific subset of internationally oriented higher education in China. A larger, survey-based study could build a far larger dataset, with questions informed by the detailed testimony provided by students in extended interviews. Students at institutions with varying entry requirements, particularly for English proficiency, could conceivably yield different insights and would be a valuable setting for further research. The study adopts an interpretive and descriptive approach, with thematic analysis used to explore participants' perspectives. This aims at depth rather than breadth, and the analysis does not seek to produce generalisable theory or predictive claims. As with all interpretive research, the researcher's background and interpretive lens inevitably shape the thematic construction. Efforts were made to enhance transparency and reflexivity throughout the research process, but the influence of researcher subjectivity cannot be fully eliminated. Future research could build on these findings through larger-scale, multi-institutional studies and by incorporating multilingual data collection to better capture the diversity of student perspectives.

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Appendix A: Interview Sample

Identifier	*Year of Study*	*Gender*	*Plan to study abroad*	*Prefers Face to Face*	*Note*
Student 1	2	F(emale)	Y	Y	Joint interview
Student 2	2	F	N	N	Joint interview
Student 3	2	F	Y	Y	
Student 4	3	F	N	Y	
Student 5	2	F	Y	Y	
Student 6	2	M(ale)	Y	N	
Student 7	3	F	N	Y	
Student 8	3	M	N	Y	
Student 9	3	M	N	Y	Written responses
Student 10	2	M	Y	Y	
Student 11	3	M	N	N/A	
Student 12	3	M	N	Y	Joint interview
Student 13	3	F	N	N	Joint interview
Student 14	2	M	N	Y	

Appendix B: Interview Questions (pre-circulated to participants, English and Chinese versions)

1. Do you prefer face-to-face or digital communication (QQ) with foreign teachers, why?
2. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of communicating face-to-face with foreign teachers?
3. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of communicating using a messenger app (QQ)?
4. What are the **main topics** you need to communicate with foreign staff about (e.g. assignments, deadlines, questions about the course etc.)?
5. Do you think there are differences in communication style between foreign and Chinese teachers, what are they?
6. Do you ever feel **frustrated** or **limited** in your ability to communicate with foreign teachers?
7. Would you prefer to communicate with foreign teachers in English or Chinese?
8. Have you ever encountered a situation where you felt you **could not** communicate effectively with a foreign teacher (due to language, cultural differences etc.)?
9. Have you got any **advice for foreign teachers** who want to communicate effectively with Chinese college students?
10. Have you got any **advice for students** who want to communicate effectively with foreign teachers?

目标：中国学生如何管理与外教的沟通？

1. 你更喜欢与外教面对面还是数字交流（QQ），为什么？
2. 在您看来，与外教面对面交流有什么好处和坏处？
3. 在您看来，使用信使应用程序（QQ）进行交流的优点和缺点是什么？
4. 您需要与外籍员工沟通的主要话题是什么（例如作业、截止日期、有关课程的问题等）？
5. 您认为外教和中外教的沟通方式有哪些差异，有哪些区别？
6. 你是否曾经在与外教沟通方面感到沮丧或受限？
7. 您愿意用英语还是中文与外教交流？
8. 你有没有遇到过你觉得无法与外教有效沟通的情况（由于语言、文化差异等）？
9. 对于想与中国大学生进行有效沟通的外教，您有什么建议吗？
10. 对于想与外教进行有效沟通的学生，您有什么建议吗？