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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？

Reconceptualising the IBDP and IAL as English-Medium Instruction: A Critical Review of Policy and Pedagogical Implications for International Schools

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical reconceptualisation of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) and International A-Levels (IAL) as forms of English-medium instruction (EMI). Despite their global implementation in international schools, these curricula are rarely analysed through an EMI lens, even though they serve increasingly linguistically diverse student populations for whom English is an additional language (LX). Drawing on a critical review of policy documents and literature, the paper examines how English is positioned, how language support is managed, and how assessment and pedagogy are framed. Informed by principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the paper critiques the limited and inconsistent guidance regarding support for LX learners. It argues that failing to conceptualise these curricula as EMI has led to gaps in teacher preparation, curriculum equity, and access. The paper concludes with recommendations for curriculum providers, policymakers, and international schools to better align educational practice with the multilingual realities of their student populations.

Keywords*:* English-medium instruction (EMI); international curriculum; IBDP; International A-Levels; multilingual learners.

Introduction

A proliferation of English-medium instruction (EMI) courses has warranted more research in this area of education. However, research on this has focused on EMI courses in Higher Education (HE). A quick search on Google Scholar using the term "English-medium Instruction" brings up a multitude of research on EMI courses in Higher Education and only on the third page was there a dedicated research paper on EMI in Secondary Education, which argued that EMI courses are offered for prestige (Paulsrud & Yoximer, 2016) not dissimilar to Dearden & Macaro's (2016) observation on the reason why HE institutions offer EMI courses. Nevertheless, there is also research that takes a more pragmatic view towards the implementation of EMI in secondary schools, towards improving students' English language skills to ensure that scientific and technological knowledge can be accessed (Hammou & Kesbi, 2023; Tan & Lan, 2011). These research, however, have been limited to EMI courses in the national education systems, with the most clearly defined being the EMI schools in Hong Kong (Tse, et al 2021). There still seems to be a lacuna in the current body of literature investigating EMI in the context of international schools and international curricula. In some ways, this is not that surprising, as international schools have traditionally been seen as schools catering to an expatriate community, where the education system in international schools follows the curriculum of the home country. However, a significant portion of international schools now enrol predominantly local students whose

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first language is not English, unlike traditionally international schools, which were serving expatriate communities and, by extension, native English speakers. Cambridge and Thompson (2004) categorise these schools as "Type-C" international schools - international schools that cater primarily to host-country nationals. These schools frequently offer curricula such as the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) or International A-Levels (IAL), which are two-year programmes recognised almost universally as a high school leaving certificate, most commonly used as an entry requirement to universities around the world. These programmes are assessed and delivered almost entirely in English. In these contexts, English functions as a gatekeeping academic language, even though students and teachers often operate in multiple languages. The assumption that English is a neutral medium of instruction no longer holds, and the challenges faced by English as an additional language (LX) students remain under-addressed. This paper, therefore, examines the development of EMI programmes and the evolution of the IBDP and IAL as dominant post-secondary curricula in international schools. It argues, first, that these qualifications should be explicitly recognised as EMI programmes and, second, that international schools must adopt more responsive pedagogical and institutional strategies to support student success in these linguistically demanding contexts.

Methodology

This paper adopts a critical review methodology, drawing on interdisciplinary literature in English-medium instruction (EMI), international education policy, and second language learning in globalised schooling contexts. The primary focus is secondary-level EMI in international schools, particularly in relation to the IBDP and IAL. Given the limited research directly addressing EMI at this level, studies from higher education are included where they provide relevant insights. For example, Dearden's (2014) global survey highlights gaps in EMI teacher preparation, Macaro et al. (2018) provide a comprehensive framework for defining EMI, Humphreys (2017) illustrates challenges faced by international students in Anglophone higher education, and Kirkpatrick (2014) examines language policy tensions in multilingual Asian contexts. Together, these perspectives help frame the analysis of EMI provision in international secondary schools.

The scope of the review is international, with a particular emphasis on non-Anglophone contexts where international schools deliver curricula in English to linguistically diverse student populations. The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed studies and policy reports addressing EMI, international curricula (IBDP and IAL), multilingual pedagogies, and the linguistic challenges faced by LX (non-native) students. Research from higher education was included where it offered transferable insights into secondary-level challenges. Excluded were studies focused solely on monolingual Anglophone systems (e.g., UK/US domestic schooling), literature without substantive links to EMI or international curricula, and classroom-based interventions outside the scope of IBDP or IAL provision.

To complement this literature review, the paper also examines policy documents from the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) and IAL awarding bodies, focusing on curricular and language-in-education policies. These include IBO's *Guidelines for Developing a School Language Policy* (2008a), *Learning in a Language Other than Mother Tongue in IB Programmes* (2008b), and *IB Language Policy* (2014, 2023a); Oxford AQA's *Fair Assessment for International Schools* (2024); Pearson's *Use of Languages in Qualifications Policy* (2023); and Cambridge Assessment International Education's (CAIE) *Instructions for Setters of Questions* (2020) and *Cambridge Principles into Practice: Language Guides for Schools* (2021).

The analysis is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), used here as a sensitising framework rather than as a formal CDA study. CDA's concern with how institutional discourses construct ideologies, power relations, and silences (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993) guided the reading of these texts. Specifically, attention was paid to how policy discourse frames learner success, defines language support, and positions teachers and students in relation to English and other languages. Equally important were omissions, such as explicit guidance on CALP development or multilingual pedagogy, which reveal underlying assumptions about language in international

education. Meanwhile, the thematic structure of the Discussion section covers student access, staffing, teaching and learning, instructional materials, and assessment, derived inductively from the recurring issues across both the literature and the policy texts. The analysis is further informed by Cummins' (1979) BICS/CALP framework, which highlights the distinction between conversational and academic English. This provides a useful lens for evaluating how policy documents and practices address (or neglect) the development of academic language.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The Literature Review situates the study within debates on EMI, language-in-education approaches, and the expansion of international schools. The Results section analyses how language policy is articulated in the IBDP and IAL, drawing attention to key discourses and omissions. The Discussion connects these findings to wider challenges in international schools, focusing on student access, staffing, teaching and learning, instructional materials, and assessment. Finally, the Conclusion synthesises the insights, sets out recommendations for policy and practice, and suggests avenues for future research.

Literature Review

Defining and Problematizing EMI in Global Contexts

English-medium instruction (EMI) has expanded rapidly across educational levels and global contexts, but its definitions remain contested. Macaro et al. (2018, p. 37) define EMI as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English", while Dearden (2014) similarly defines it as subject instruction in jurisdictions where English is not the first language. These definitions primarily reflect non-Anglophone settings but risk oversimplifying complex linguistic realities. For example, Humphreys (2017) highlights how international students in Anglophone countries, such as Australia, may still face linguistic challenges akin to those in non-English-speaking contexts due to limited interaction with native speakers. The assumption that immersion with native English (L1) users is necessary for language development is increasingly questioned, especially given that most English interactions globally occur among non-native (LX) users. Consequently, EMI cannot be treated as a monolithic model - it varies by country, educational level, institution type, and linguistic context.

EMI's rapid expansion, particularly in the private sector, is driven by its perceived link to global mobility and academic opportunity (Dearden, 2014; Tan & Lan, 2011). Universities now pressure secondary schools to prepare students linguistically for EMI, extending their reach to younger learners (Macaro et al., 2019). However, this growth has outpaced the development of qualified teachers. Dearden (2014) notes that 83% of countries surveyed lack sufficient EMI-trained educators. Many teachers receive little pre- or in-service training, and some institutions favour L1 English speakers despite evidence that language background alone does not guarantee pedagogical effectiveness (Qiu & Fang, 2022). In reality, successful EMI often depends on the strategic use of students' full linguistic repertoires, including translanguaging and scaffolding academic language (Macaro et al., 2019; Alkhudair, 2019).

EMI also triggers social and political tensions. In Italy, a 2012 court ruling warned that English-only degrees could marginalise the national language (Civinini, 2018). Malaysia's PPSMI policy, which mandated the use of English for Science and Maths, was reversed due to concerns over language equity (Yunus, 2020). However, despite such setbacks, EMI persists through private-sector initiatives, often with little regulatory oversight. As Dearden (2014) notes, EMI is "in a state of flux", always subject to changing national policies but increasingly entrenched in global education markets.

Theoretical Perspectives on Language in Education

Several theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for examining the IBDP and IAL as EMI programmes. They help explain why students may struggle when language demands are overlooked

and why policies that neglect scaffolding, multilingual support, or explicit academic language development risk reinforcing inequities.

A central framework is Cummins' (1979) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While many international school students achieve conversational fluency relatively quickly, the advanced academic language required for success in linguistically demanding subjects such as History, Economics, or Literature typically takes years to master. This distinction underscores the importance of embedding CALP development into subject teaching, rather than assuming conversational proficiency equates to readiness for academic study. Relatedly, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development provides the theoretical foundation for scaffolding, whereby teachers and peers support learners until they can work independently. In EMI classrooms, this often involves modelling academic language, structuring tasks in stages, and making discourse patterns explicit.

Airey's (2016) work on translanguaging further highlights students' full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning, advocating flexible use of the L1 alongside English to support comprehension. Despite official English-only policies, research shows that both teachers and students frequently rely on translanguaging and code-switching to make meaning (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). This aligns with Canagarajah's (2007) emphasis on English as a lingua franca (ELF), where preparing students to navigate multilingual communicative practices may be more relevant than privileging native-speaker norms.

Together, these perspectives indicate that effective EMI provision requires more than immersion in English. Instead, it depends on deliberate pedagogical strategies that develop CALP, scaffold content learning, and recognise multilingual resources as assets rather than deficits.

The Rise of International Schools

The definition of an international school is also contested, but Hayden and Thompson's (2013) typology of Type A (traditional expatriate-focused), Type B (ideologically driven), and Type C (serving host-country nationals) offers a useful lens. Of these, Type C schools have seen the most rapid growth, a trend Bunnell (2022) calls "phenomenal and largely unpredicted." These are typically for-profit institutions delivering curricula such as the IBDP or IAL to local, non-native English-speaking (LX) students. According to ISC Research (2024), the number of international schools has grown by 49% since 2014, with student enrolment up by 52%. For example, as of 2024, Egypt has 96 international schools, Malaysia 180, and Spain 300—most serving domestic populations through English-medium international curricula (International Schools Database, 2024).

This expansion is driven by similar motivations seen in EMI adoption. English proficiency is widely seen as essential for global mobility and socio-economic advancement, with fluency offering access to elite universities and international career paths (Sears, 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Wan & Gao, 2021). Parents also value exposure to foreign teachers and curricula perceived as internationally prestigious, particularly those taught by L1 English speakers (Ignatius, 2022; Oxford Business Group, 2016). As of 2022, British and International A Levels were the most common qualifications among international schools (32%), followed closely by the IB Diploma (27%) (ISC Research, 2022).

The linguistic profile of international school students has also undergone a dramatic shift. While traditional schools catered to L1 English-speaking expatriates, today, only around 25% of students are native English speakers. Another 25% speak the host-country language, and 50% speak other languages (Carder, 2018). In 90% of these schools, English remains the main language of instruction, rendering native speakers a minority. Many international schools now operate outside Anglophone countries, delivering content exclusively in English, sometimes with limited engagement in broader international values (Bunnell, 2022). Even state schools, such as the over 200 public institutions in Ecuador, are adopting curricula like the IBDP (Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014; Bittencourt, 2020). These

trends affirm the need to view IAL and IBDP as de facto EMI programmes, given their increasing delivery to linguistically diverse student bodies in non-English-dominant contexts.

Yet this growth raises questions about equity. These private institutions are often financially exclusive, potentially reinforcing socio-economic divides and reproducing a "transnational capitalist class" (Brown & Lauder, 2011; Cambridge, 2011). English, too, is not class-neutral; it remains closely associated with the urban middle and upper classes (Chua, 2007, in Kenway & Koh, 2013). Critics argue that international education risks commodifying access to higher education, while others suggest it may democratise quality schooling through competition and integration into national systems (Bailey, 2021; Tay, 2024).

Results

Language Policy in the IBDP

The preamble to IB's Language Policy states that:

> The International Baccalaureate® (IB) is committed to supporting plurilingualism as fundamental to increasing intercultural understanding and international-mindedness, as well as to providing access to an IB education for students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. (IBO, 2023a)

To support plurilingualism, the IBO has designated English, Spanish, and French as its "External Working Languages" for high-level communication and the provision of services across all its programmes. Additionally, the IBO recognises Arabic, Chinese, German, Korean, Japanese, Indonesian, and Turkish as IB Access Languages. The IBO has published documents such as "Guidelines for Developing a School Language Policy" and "Learning in a Language Other Than Mother Tongue in IB Programmes," emphasising the importance of maintaining mother tongue proficiency alongside learning new languages. For IBDP students, the IBO requires the study of two languages: one in which the student is already competent and another in a new or less familiar language (IBO, 2023b). As of 2023, 55 languages are available for study, and students can request to study their mother tongue as an IB subject if sufficient written literature exists (IBO, 2023b).

In addition, IBO also shows its commitment to plurilingualism by offering the Dual Language IB Diploma Programme (DLDP). A bilingual diploma is awarded to candidates who complete and receive a grade 3 or higher in two languages selected from the [IB]DP course studies in language and literature and a grade 3 or higher in an individuals and societies or science subject, completed in a different language (IBO, 2023c). In 2022 alone, more than a quarter of the diplomas awarded were bilingual diplomas (IBO, 2022).

Alongside the emphasis given on maintaining and developing mother tongue languages, the IB has also explicitly set out guidelines and principles on how to ensure students who are not learning in their mother tongue can get the most out of the IB programme. It was recommended that teachers should "explicitly activate learners' prior understanding using the mother tongue if appropriate" (IBO 2008b, p. 9). This is in addition to making sure that tasks are differentiated and build upon further background knowledge (IBO, 2008b). It was also emphasised in this document that all IB teachers are also language teachers as "proficiency in cognitive academic language is inseparable from successful learning in school" (IBO 2008b, p. 9). This is easier said than done, but the same IB document also emphasises that there should be professional development in place for teachers and other support staff to ensure this can be effectively done to support students who are not learning in their L1 (IBO, 2008b). However, just like the IBO guidelines in other areas of education, the organisation is very clear on policy development but not policy implementation.

Language Policy in the IAL

Unlike the IBDP, the IAL is a heterogeneous international curriculum. There is not one awarding body offering the qualification called the "International A-Levels" but four. In addition to CAIE, which was the first to offer the IAL back in the 1950s, Pearson Edexcel, Oxford AQA, and the Learning Resource Network (LRN) have also started offering this qualification, with the latter being the most recent player in the game (Tay, 2023, pp. 95-96). Although each of these awarding body offer a slightly different suite of products, the general framework is the same. The typical student takes three different A-Level subjects in two years, and the grades from these three will be their main passport to get into university. There are no specifically prescribed subject groups or subjects that students must take, which provides schools the flexibility to offer only subjects that they see fit, and for students to only take subjects that they are interested in. Subject combinations, therefore, could be as narrow as Economics, Business, and Accounting or as diverse as Law, Biology, and French, for example. With regards to languages, although it is possible to take up an A-Level in a language, there is no emphasis on studying a mother tongue language or any languages during the course of a student's time doing their IAL. A quick count of the language subjects (excluding English) offered by the various IAL awarding bodies reveals that CAIE has nine language subjects, Pearson has five, while Oxford AQA and LRN have none (CAIE, 2024; Pearson, 2024; OxfordAQA, 2024; LRN, 2019).

CAIE explicitly recognises that learners enrolled in an IAL programme may still be in the developmental stages of their English language acquisition and that learners may know and develop other languages besides English. Language learners are categorised into three main types by CAIE (2021, p. 19):

- A first language learner who speaks the language at home and possibly in the community and uses this language at school as the medium of instruction.
- A second language learner who speaks another language at home and often uses the second language at school as the medium of instruction.
- A foreign language learner who speaks another language at home and learns the foreign language at school in language classes.

For bilingual learners, CAIE does emphasise that languages are not separate but interdependent and that it is important to support the development of the first language for bilingual learners to enhance cognition and socialisation (CAIE, 2021). Therefore, many learners are likely to require targeted language support, especially those learning a foreign language. Therefore, all teachers are responsible for learners' language development, and all teachers need to be 'language aware' and know how to deliver their subject to learners at different stages of acquiring academic English (CAIE, 2021, pp. 9-10). Teachers teaching non-native language speakers must possess a strong command of the language they are teaching, and this proficiency should encompass subject-specific terminology, pedagogical language essential for classroom management, and social language crucial for interacting with students and others (CAIE, 2021, p. 10). In cases where teachers instruct in a language other than their first language, it's important to assess if they require professional development to enhance their language skills (CAIE 2021, p.12).

Regarding the examinations, which are ultimately the raison d'être of the IAL awarding bodies, both CAIE and Oxford AQA emphasise the importance of fair assessment for international students, particularly non-native English speakers. CAIE's "Instructions for Setters of Questions" stresses that exam language should not create unnecessary difficulty and should be clear, with simple grammatical structures and frequently used words, referencing the Collins dictionary and CEFR to guide word choice (CAIE, 2020). Similarly, OxfordAQA (2024) advocates that paper setters use the Oxford 3000 word list when constructing exam papers to ensure accessible language. Their approach to fair assessment includes ensuring that exams measure only the intended subject knowledge, effectively differentiate student performance, and do not disadvantage non-native English speakers, providing all students with equal opportunities to achieve the appropriate grade (OxfordAQA, 2024).

Discussion

The analysis above shows that both the IBDP and IAL function as EMI programmes, albeit with different priorities. The IB articulates a clear language philosophy and promotes inclusive pedagogy, though it offers little on how to implement these principles. IAL awarding bodies, especially CAIE and OxfordAQA, focus pragmatically on ensuring fair assessment for LX learners, with less emphasis on broader curricular reform. Across both models, a common assumption is that students can thrive in English-dominant academic environments with minimal systemic adjustment. As international student demographics become increasingly linguistically diverse, this demands more pedagogically grounded and equitable responses.

There is also no doubt that a significant proportion of students undertaking the IBDP and IAL are LX English speakers, leading to unique challenges. These challenges are more pronounced in linguistically demanding subjects such as History, English Literature, and Economics, highlighting the need for a focused pedagogical approach to support language development. Using Cummins' (1979) framework, even if a student in an international school may be seen as being able to communicate in English, it may only be to a Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) instead of the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) level, which usually takes at least 5-7 years more to develop. The same "7 years" timeframe was stated in the context of the time needed for non-L1 learners to reach the same proficiency level in academic language as a person learning in their L1 (IBO 2008b, p. 5). Therefore, there is a pressing need for language development across the curriculum, as emphasised by Gibbons (2015), to ensure that LX speakers are not disadvantaged in their academic progress. This is despite the existence of policies addressing these issues, as there seems to be an inconsistency between policy and practice. In general, there is a pervasive lack of awareness of pedagogical strategies for LX English speakers among key stakeholders, including school management and teachers (Dearden, 2014). The absence of practical guidelines on how to deliver education to LX English speakers further complicates the situation, creating challenges for both teachers and students alike. Therefore, this section explores five key areas where policy and pedagogy require greater alignment: student access, staffing, teaching and learning, instructional materials, and assessment. Addressing these domains is essential to ensuring that international schools offering the IBDP and IAL can more effectively meet the needs of their linguistically diverse students.

Student Access

Currently, there is little evidence of an institutionalised access model for entry into IBDP and IAL programmes. Although the IB recommends schools consider language needs in their admissions policies (IBO, 2008b), decisions are often shaped by market forces rather than pedagogical considerations. Once enrolled, students typically face limited language screening beyond initial diagnostics. In some cases, students begin the programme while still developing basic English proficiency, forcing them to learn academic content and language simultaneously.

In response, some schools adopt "shock therapy" approaches, such as mandating English-only communication. At the British International School in China, for example, students are required to speak English from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., except during Chinese lessons, with penalties for non-compliance (Wan & Gao, 2021). These policies discourage code-mixing and can undermine both comprehension and the development of local languages (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Despite evidence that L1 use supports content learning (Alkhudair, 2019; Kim et al., 2017), stigma around its use persists. While English remains the medium of instruction, the national language should complement rather than compete with it, but further research is needed to determine the optimal balance (Kirkpatrick, 2014; Pun et al., 2022).

In the absence of a clear admissions or placement model, schools need more context-specific approaches to language support. One option is a preparatory year or "foundation" programme,

where students build general and academic English skills before entering the IBDP or IAL, similar to models used by British universities. Alternatively, a concurrent support model, where students receive targeted language instruction alongside academic study, may be sufficient in some cases. In more linguistically homogenous settings, a multilingual model that incorporates both English and students' L1 in early stages of instruction could aid CALP development and ease the transition to full EMI.

Staffing

Unfortunately, the language-related challenges in EMI courses are not limited to students' proficiency but also extend to teachers (Galloway & Curle, 2022; Garner, 2024). In international schools delivering the IBDP and IAL, it is common to find subject teachers who lack certification in English, formal EMI training, or even confidence in their own language abilities. Studies from secondary and higher education suggest that many EMI teachers resort to coping strategies such as using a teacher-centred transmission approach, avoiding open-ended questions, and switching to their L1 when difficulties arise (Cheng, 2017, in Richards & Pun, 2023, p. 223). A key issue is that school leadership often treats language support as the domain of specialist staff, delegating responsibility to a small group of EAL or ESL teachers rather than upskilling the entire teaching body (Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014, p. 8).

One flawed solution to this has been the prioritisation of native English-speaking teachers. For example, some South Korean international schools explicitly hire only applicants from Anglophone countries, while a school in Vietnam requires teachers to have English as their first language above formal teaching qualifications (Carder, 2018; Sears, 2015). Yet this native-speaker bias is increasingly out of step with global linguistic realities: the majority of English users worldwide are now LX speakers (Hu & McKay, 2014, in Carder, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2014). Surveys show that fewer than a quarter of IBDP teachers have relevant credentials or ongoing professional development to support LX learners (Siqueira et al., 2018; Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014). Moreover, privileging L1 speakers may exclude capable LX teachers who, having learned English themselves, are often better positioned to empathise with and support multilingual students (Porter, 2018). From a CDA perspective, such practices reflect institutional discourses that naturalise English as an unproblematic default medium while marginalising other languages and overlooking the development of CALP. There is also a deeper issue of linguistic ownership. The overemphasis on native-speaker English can reinforce the idea that English belongs only to inner-circle countries, potentially alienating students and failing to prepare them for communication with other LX English speakers (Matsuda, 2002). Supporting students effectively requires teachers, regardless of their L1 status, to be trained to teach CALP and become more ELF-aware (Sears, 2015; Sifakis, 2006; Koshy, 2021; Ng, 2019; Dang et al., 2013). Raising teachers' language awareness and confidence should be a core focus of school-wide professional development.

However, current training opportunities remain inadequate. IBDP teacher workshops tend to focus on the IB Learner Profile, while IAL training often centres on assessment requirements (Tay, 2023). Neither system offers systematic support for teaching in EMI contexts. Instead, professional development should focus on practical strategies such as translanguaging, code-switching, scaffolding academic literacy, and adapting language to suit multilingual classrooms (Airey, 2016). Teachers also need hands-on training in modelling, guiding, and supporting unfamiliar literacy activities, which are particularly important skills when working with older students in content-heavy courses like the IBDP and IAL (Sears, 2015, p. 270).

There are established training models available that could be adopted or adapted, such as the Cambridge Assessment Certificate in EMI Skills, the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), Teaching ESL Students in Mainstream Classrooms, and the International Teacher Certificate (Sears, 2015, p. 220). For greater impact, some scholars have advocated incorporating Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) into professional learning, as SFL equips teachers to scaffold instruction in ways that provide LX students with accessible academic input (Koshy, 2021, p. 67).

Teaching and Learning

Despite the IBO and CAIE's repeated assertion that "all teachers are responsible for language development" (IBO 2011, p. 14; CAIE 2021, p. 9), classroom practice often tells a different story. Teachers in international schools frequently view themselves as either content or language specialists, rarely both (Banegas, 2012). Content teachers, in particular, tend to see EMI courses as vehicles for knowledge transmission rather than opportunities for language development (Pun et al., 2022; Airey, 2016; Hammou & Kesbi, 2023). As a result, language-related challenges are commonly deferred to EAL departments or specialist staff (Dale & Mearns, 2023). This division is reinforced by a general lack of collaboration between subject and language teachers, as Richards and Pun (2023) observe.

Empirical studies confirm that in many international school classrooms, content is prioritised over linguistic accuracy. Teachers often focus on delivering subject-specific vocabulary while being permissive about grammatical errors, so long as meaning is conveyed (Novotna & Dunkova, 2015). Teachers, nevertheless, cannot be fully blamed, for there is simply not enough time in subject classes to try to tackle both language and subject content. This approach is consistent across international schools and EMI courses (Dale & Mearns, 2023; Metli & Akis, 2022).

English classes in international schools also tend to operate in isolation from IBDP and IAL content courses. Language support departments themselves are frequently marginalised. In some cases, entire EAL programmes have been eliminated due to low enrolment or staff attrition (Carder, 2018). Only schools with what Koshy (2021) calls "enlightened leadership of principles" attempt to systematically link English instruction to the academic demands of these curricula. This siloed approach is problematic in single- or dual-medium schools, where cross-disciplinary collaboration is minimal. While Richards and Pun (2023) cite the Singapore model as an example of successful EMI implementation, the linguistic context in Singapore is vastly different: most students there use English regularly outside the classroom, which is not the case in many international schools offering the IBDP or IAL. Even CAIE acknowledges that many IAL students are "foreign language learners who speak another language at home and learn English as a foreign language at school" (CAIE, 2021, p. 19).

Yet where collaboration does occur, the benefits are clear. Joint efforts between subject and language teachers have been shown to enhance both comprehension and the quality of student work. Targeted initiatives, such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in areas like Biology or Statistics, can help develop the academic language students need to succeed. Thematic English classes, which incorporate a broad range of academic content or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), are another effective way to support CALP development. CAIE has encouraged schools to foster closer integration between language and subject instruction to meet the needs of LX learners better (CAIE, 2021). By embedding language support within the curriculum and aligning it with subject learning outcomes, schools can provide more equitable access to the IBDP and IAL for linguistically diverse students.

Instructional Materials

Instructional materials in EMI contexts should make academic content more accessible without overwhelming learners linguistically (Gray, 2013). Yet, numerous studies highlight a persistent lack of resources specifically designed for LX English speakers (Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014; Morton, 2013; Metli & Akis, 2022; Sears, 2015). For instance, a study in a Malaysian school offering both national and international curricula found a clear disparity in English writing resources: abundant for national exams but lacking for international ones (Huzaimi & Mohamad, 2024).

In the case of the IBDP, although commercially produced materials are widely available, particularly online, many fail to acknowledge that a large proportion of candidates are now LX English users. IB-approved textbooks are often lengthy and dense, resembling university-level texts, which may hinder accessibility and comprehension. Teachers frequently report that international textbooks are poorly aligned with students' linguistic and cultural contexts. To bridge this gap, many

teachers develop bespoke materials (Morton, 2013), but this raises concerns: untrained teachers may produce resources lacking pedagogical rigour, and the additional workload contributes to burnout.

In linguistically homogeneous schools, bilingual or multilingual resources can enhance comprehension and learner confidence. In more linguistically diverse environments, well-designed English-language materials with embedded language development strategies are essential (Richards & Pun, 2023). These should go beyond simplified vocabulary to explicitly support students' CALP development. The IB's Access Languages initiative has made some progress in this regard, offering materials in selected L1s. However, schools continue to request further multilingual support (Ballantyne & Rivera, 2014).

In contrast, IAL awarding bodies provide minimal top-down support in languages other than English. As a result, a bottom-up response has emerged: teachers and schools develop and share their own resources via platforms like TES, Facebook, and Telegram (Vo & Tran, 2025). While these grassroots efforts are promising, they remain uneven and often lack pedagogical coherence. A more structured and informed approach is urgently needed. Viewed through a CDA lens, this lack of structured support reflects a wider institutional discourse that assumes English to be universally accessible, leaving LX students to adapt to materials not designed with their needs in mind. This positions language as neutral while obscuring its role in shaping access to knowledge.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) offers a useful model for addressing some of these challenges. CLIL instructional materials are often more scaffolded, visually supported, and linguistically accessible (Morton, 2013). Sears (2015) also highlights the importance of explicitly teaching the language demands of subject-specific tasks—an approach still underdeveloped in many IBDP and IAL contexts. Moreover, EMI materials should foster students' sense of language ownership, encouraging them to view English as an international language rather than the exclusive domain of inner-circle English-speaking countries (Sifakis, 2006; Matsuda, 2003; Vo & Tran, 2025).

Assessments

Policy statements from the awarding bodies assert that assessments should not measure language proficiency unless explicitly intended to do so. It is clear that content mastery takes precedence over language development. The removal of "Quality of Written Communication" (QWC) as an assessment criterion in the UK A-Levels, for example, reflects efforts to avoid disadvantaging LX English speakers. Nonetheless, even with adjustments to exam wording and question structure, the heavy reliance on English can still pose challenges for students with developing academic language proficiency. To address this, assessment practices in EMI programmes such as the IBDP and IAL must do more than simply simplify language. There is a pressing need to develop assessment models that support the progression from Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) without compromising academic rigour. One way forward is through formative assessment practices that offer feedback on both language and content. These can play a dual role: reinforcing subject understanding while fostering the language skills necessary for academic success.

Models such as CLIL and SIOP provide examples of how formative assessments can balance content knowledge with language support. In these contexts, assessments are designed to integrate both language and content objectives, ensuring that students build their CALP alongside disciplinary knowledge. Such models demonstrate that attention to language in assessment need not come at the expense of rigour but rather can enhance access and long-term achievement. Adopting similar approaches in IBDP and IAL contexts would represent a meaningful step toward closing the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom practice. As EMI continues to expand, assessment models must evolve to reflect the linguistic realities of increasingly diverse student cohorts. Ensuring that LX students are fairly assessed, not just in terms of what they know, but also in how they demonstrate that knowledge, should be a central concern for schools, teachers, and awarding bodies alike.

Conclusion

The demographic profile of IAL and IBDP learners clearly reflects broader trends of globalisation and marketisation in international education, with most students now from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Despite curricular differences, both programmes operate as de facto EMI models, consistent with Macaro et al.'s (2018) definition of EMI as the use of English to teach academic content where it is not the dominant language. A CDA-informed reading of policies and practices shows how English is positioned as neutral and universally accessible, while other languages are marginalised and CALP development overlooked.

This paper has identified four interlinked challenges:

- weak integration between language and content teaching,
- the privileging of L1 English teachers,
- a scarcity of appropriate materials, and
- restrictive English-only policies.

These are ideological rather than inevitable constraints. Research on content-based instruction, translanguaging, and bilingual pedagogies demonstrates how schools can support both language development and academic achievement (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Canagarajah, 2007).

Therefore, based on the evidence discussed, several interrelated recommendations emerge for international schools offering the IBDP and IAL. First, teacher training and professional development should be enhanced by embedding CALP-focused content and incorporating EMI-specific programmes to better prepare staff for linguistically diverse classrooms. Equally important is fostering collaboration between content and language teachers through joint planning and co-teaching, ensuring that academic language development is systematically integrated within subject instruction. Schools should also establish robust language support models, including preparatory language programmes, concurrent support structures, and, where possible, bilingual or multilingual instructional pathways. At the same time, assessment practices also require careful revision to incorporate formative approaches and ensure alignment between content and language objectives, thereby providing a fairer reflection of student achievement. Similarly, instructional materials should be developed or adapted to include scaffolding, explicit integration of language learning, and, when appropriate, the use of bilingual or multilingual resources. At the institutional level, admissions and access policies should adopt clear language proficiency benchmarks while also considering multilingual models that reflect the realities of international student populations. Finally, schools must cultivate a language-aware culture that promotes critical engagement with English as a lingua franca and recognises the value of students' wider linguistic repertoires. There is no doubt that some schools have begun to adopt such approaches, but provision remains uneven and often ad hoc. Moving beyond this 'wild west' stage will require clearer, top-down frameworks from awarding bodies and school leaders that reflect the realities of linguistically diverse populations.

This study nevertheless has limitations. As a critical review, it synthesises scholarship and policy documents rather than drawing on empirical classroom data. The evidence base for EMI in secondary international schools, particularly for IAL programmes, remains underdeveloped. Future research should include classroom-based investigations, evaluations of EMI-specific teacher training, and comparative analyses of IB and IAL frameworks to build a stronger empirical foundation.

Ultimately, while challenges remain formidable, they are not insurmountable. With deliberate reform and greater coherence between policy and practice, international schools can move beyond treating English as a neutral medium and instead embrace linguistically responsive pedagogies—better preparing students not only to succeed academically but to thrive as multilingual, globally competent citizens.

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Nepali Students In Japanese Language Schools: Investigating Motivations And Experiences Of Educational Mobility

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Abstract: *The rapidly growing number of Nepali students in Japan represents a significant yet under-researched student population in international education research. This paper investigates Nepali students` motivations for educational mobility and experiences in Japanese language schools (nihongo gakkō), key institutions for hosting international students. Drawing on semi-structured interview narratives with eight Nepali students, this study argues that their mobility signifies a new trend and greater accessibility in educational mobility, primarily driven by non-academic aspirations. The findings suggest that the motivations behind Nepali students` mobility essentially lie in the inherent dream of upward social mobility and are strongly influenced by emerging mobility infrastructures. This study aims to enrich the current scholarship on marginal student mobility by shedding light on the mobility motivation of Japan's rapidly growing Nepali student population.*

Keywords: *Educational mobility, language schools, mobility motivation, Nepali students, social mobility*

Introduction

Educational mobility has become a mass aspiration among youth from the Global South and is often viewed as a transformative pathway to life opportunities and social advancement. These aspirations are shaped by the intersection of disappointment with the home context (Bal, 2013) and the cosmopolitan imaginaries of the host country (Stein & De Andreotti, 2016), often reinforced through social media, social networks, and recruitment agents (Collins, 2013). While international student mobility (ISM) is diversifying in terms of student profiles and destination countries (Brunner et al., 2023), much of the scholarly focus remains on elite, Global North-centered academic mobility (Lipura & Collins, 2020). The mobility of less-privileged students pursuing non-academic degrees in non-traditional destinations remains underexplored.

Japan has been a popular destination for many Nepali youths from less-privileged backgrounds, marking a notable shift from their earlier preference for Anglophone countries. Over the past decade, the number of Nepali students in Japan has grown dramatically, from 3,188 in 2013 to 37,878 in 2023 and then to 64,816 in 2024, an increase of more than 70% from the previous year, making them the second-largest group of international students in Japan after China (JASSO, 2025). In the fiscal year 2023/24, Nepali students coming to Japan represented the largest share of Nepal's outbound student population. Of the 112,593 No Objection Certificates (NOCs) issued by Nepal's Ministry of Education for study abroad, 34,731 were for Japan, of which 33,697 were specifically for Japanese language schools (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2024). Despite this rising trend, the experiences and motivations of this student population remain under investigated.

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This study addresses the existing literature gap by investigating the educational mobility trajectories of eight Nepali students enrolled in five different Japanese language schools in the Hokuriku region of Japan, specifically in the city of Hokuriku. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and field notes collected in 2023, this study explores Nepali students' motivations and lived experiences, thereby shedding light on the socio-structural factors likely shaping their educational mobility. The Hokuriku region has become an attractive business expansion site for Japanese language schools because of its low operational costs and enhanced accessibility via a bullet train directly connected to Tokyo. The presence of international students in the Hokuriku region has led to the emergence of ethnic grocery stores and relocation of recruiting and real estate companies to support students with part-time job placements and housing. Their involvement in the local labor market as employees of convenience stores, hotels, and restaurants also signifies their growing engagement in various spheres of Japanese society.

Against the backdrop of the shifting paradigm of ISM, this paper situates the experiences of Nepali students within the broader dynamics of neoliberal globalization. This research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of ISM by examining marginal mobilities (Collins & Ho, 2018) and calls for a more humanized approach to research and policy that recognizes the diverse identities and struggles of international students and prioritizes their well-being and enhancement of their mobility experience (Gomes, 2024; Mittelmeier et al., 2023).

Underpinnings of International Student Mobility

The literature on ISM predominantly frames it as a means of capital accumulation, often involving privileged students undertaking academic degrees in Anglophone countries to maintain and reproduce social advantages upon returning to their home country (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2012; Yang, 2018). However, the global proliferation of the international education market in the context of neoliberal globalization has reshaped this narrative, expanding access to ISM beyond elite circles (Waters & Brooks, 2021). Recent developments in ISM extend beyond the conventional elite narrative of `distinction and reproduction` (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2012), facilitating the broader participation of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in educational mobility beyond West-centric, traditional destinations (Brooks & Waters, 2022; Olwig & Valentin, 2014).

Existing literature on ISM has frequently employed a push-pull framework to analyze student decision-making processes, destination choices, and motivations for studying abroad (Cao et al., 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors are unfavorable conditions in the home countries that compel students to leave, whereas pull factors attract students to the destination countries (Cao et al., 2016). In a recent empirical study on Bangladeshi university students, Zaman et al. (2024, pp. 6) found that the push factors, such as poor education quality, unemployment, political instability, corruption, discrimination, and environmental degradation, force these students to consider leaving their home country, while pull factors in destination countries, such as improved standards of living, better economic and career opportunities, the rule of law, migration prospects, and cultural diversity, make going to a foreign destination more attractive. Krzaklewska (2008, pp. 95–96) categorized Erasmus students` motivations as experimental and career-oriented. The experimental dimension included cultural and personal motivations, such as learning a new culture, having new experiences, and meeting new people. The career dimension encompasses both career and academic motivations. While the experimental dimension primarily drives American, British, and European students to attend high-ranking universities or experience adventure, Asian and African students are more commonly motivated by education and career-related factors (Yasmin et al., 2022; Krzaklewska, 2008).

Studies have reported several other factors that influence the choice of study destinations, including historical and cultural ties, geographic proximity, education quality, costs, program availability, host country environment, post-graduation immigration prospects, financial support, and employability opportunities (Sidhu & Ishikawa, 2020; Wu et al., 2019)—from an analysis of educational agents` websites in five South Asian countries, Rust (2023) observed that educational

agents may actively construct and communicate push-pull factors to align student aspirations with the perceived attraction of studying in a host country.

Despite the dominant use of the push-pull model to discuss the ISM motivations, it often overlooks the complexity and multiplicity of the factors involved. For example, the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts in which students make educational mobility decisions and the various factors influencing their mobility aspirations have been less recognized (Findlay, 2011). As Lipura and Collins (2020) pointed out, the push-pull framework considers students' decision-making as a linear process, ignoring how aspirations often unfold unpredictably. In addition, Martin (2017) argued that it reduces mobility motivations to instrumental goals and portrays students as `passive subjects to external forces`.

Drawing on the concept of transnationalism (Schiller et al., 1995), this study critically examines the educational mobility motivations and lived experiences of low-resourced Nepali students beyond the explanatory limits of the push–pull model. Given that recent language-based non-degree educational mobility to Japan increasingly involves socially and economically marginalized students, their decisions and aspirations are situated within transnational social fields where networks, imaginaries, and obligations span multiple geographies and scales (Schiller et al., 1995). Influenced by the studies that focus on transnational obligations (Geddie, 2013), life-course strategies (Findlay et al., 2012), and motivation dynamism (Carlson, 2013), this paper adopts a transnational lens to explore how mobility decisions are shaped relationally and in process, involving actors and institutions across both sending and receiving contexts.

Undertaken under precarious circumstances—often involving debt, poverty, and social exclusion (Collins & Ho, 2018; Wilson et al., 2023) — this educational mobility represents more than an economic strategy; it is a transformative journey of self-becoming (Tran, 2015). Therefore, this paper argues that transnationalism offers a more adequate framework to understand why and how low-resource, non-degree-seeking students navigate and make sense of their aspirations, uncertainties, and experiences. While the recent market-based trend of educational mobility has included historically marginalized students, it is often understood from deficit-driven perspectives. Students enrolled in non-degree courses at peripheral destinations are frequently viewed as having certain deficiencies, such as a lack of linguistic and cultural capital, while ignoring their multiple identities. Recent studies examining the emerging diversification of educational mobility (Chacko, 2020; Cheng, 2016; Gilmartin et al., 2020) have revealed that students often experience multifaceted challenges, including financial constraints, cultural adjustment issues, and precarious living and working conditions.

A growing body of literature on ISM during and after COVID-19 has highlighted international students` vulnerability, including mental stress, discrimination, and the challenges of online learning due to the extended lockdowns and mobility restrictions (Gaitanidis, 2021; Sondhi, 2025). This disruption has led ISM discourses to prioritize human justice and the well-being of international students by focusing on the role of emotional resilience and institutional support in shaping their experiences (Gomes, 2025; Lee & Waters, 2024; Sidhu & Ishikawa, 2020). The heightened precarity of international students during COVID-19 makes it evident that they are more vulnerable during crises and, therefore, need more supportive international education practices and policies beyond economic narratives.

Japanese Language Schools: A Gateway to the Japanese Labor Market

Japanese language schools that provide Japanese language courses for international students are key hosting institutions for international students and serve as a gateway to further education and employment opportunities in Japan (Liu-Farrer & Tran, 2019; Sato et al., 2020). These rapidly growing language schools have recently become crowded with international students from South and East Asian countries, particularly China, Nepal, Vietnam, and Myanmar. While Japanese language school

students constitute more than 31% of the total international students in Japan, 107,241 out of 336,708 students in 2024 (JASSO, 2025), they are often overlooked in academic discussions.

International students in Japan are seen as a source of human resources to address the changing demographic challenges and shifting economic priorities (Yonezawa, 2020). The Japanese government has employed strategic approaches to attract and retain these students. These initiatives, for example, the Plan to Accept 100,000 Foreign Students in 1983, the 300,000 International Students Plan in 2008, the Global 30 Project in 2009, and the Top Global University Project in 2014-2023, have been designed to foster human capital for the Japanese labor market through the internationalization of higher education (Hennings & Mintz, 2015). Immigration policies also aim to facilitate international graduates' education-to-work transition by allowing them a six-month-to one-year post-graduation job-seeking visa.

A handful of studies have explicitly focused on Japanese language students. These studies have explored how Japanese language schools bring in and supply international students to the Japanese labor market, limiting their role as visa sponsors and failing to perform their broader educational and welfare responsibilities. In her study of Chinese students, Liu-Farrer (2009) conceptualized this trend as "educationally channeled labor migration," while Dadabaev et al. (2021), focusing on students from Uzbekistan, describe it as "language migration." Kharel (2022) documents how Nepali students instrumentalize Japan's "side-door" labor migration system. Similarly, in her ethnographic analysis, Shrestha (2023) discusses the role of commercial agents in commodifying student labor, often channeling them into exploitative work.

While these studies (Liu-Farrer, 2009; Sato et al., 2020; Shrestha, 2023) have highlighted the institutional failures that have resulted in students` precarious experiences and zoomed in on the students` deficiencies, such as limited opportunities to engage in the Japanese community meaningfully, lower Japanese proficiency among non-Chinese character (kanji)-background students, and the prioritization of part-time work over academic goals, little attention has been paid to their sociocultural context of mobility. It has failed to recognize the students` transformative potential and agency in navigating their migration trajectories.

Nepali Students in Japanese Language Schools: Precarious Pathways to Mobility

The rapid expansion of Japanese language schools has led many Nepali students, particularly those from less-privileged backgrounds, to seek upward social mobility through education and employment opportunities in Japan. For many Nepali youth, Japanese-language schools have been an alternative pathway to international migration, as access to higher education in traditional English-speaking destinations such as Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom remains financially and academically challenging. This can also be attributed to dissatisfaction with higher education opportunities and the youth unemployment rates in the home country (Sato et al., 2020). Despite the significant financial investment required for educational migration, discontent resulting from political and economic chaos has pushed many Nepali youth to seek educational opportunities abroad to improve their employability and career prospects. Social networks and the rapidly growing intermediary educational agents and consultancies in Nepal are central to this migration paradigm, functioning as indispensable conduits that facilitate migration by actively promoting Japanese language education as a viable route for both academic and employment prospects (Kharel, 2022; Shrestha, 2023).

The rapidly growing Nepali students` experience in Japan is characterized by increasing precarity because of linguistic and cultural barriers, economic and emotional hardship, and visa uncertainties. Previous studies report that Nepali students often engage in labor-intensive, casual work in sectors such as the food industry, hospitality, cleaning, and other service industries, under exploitative conditions and with significant job insecurity (Kharel, 2022; Sato et al., 2020; Shrestha, 2023). This results in a dual burden of academic obligation and economic survival, leading to heightened stress, limited opportunities for career advancement, and constrained social mobility.

Their vulnerability is further exacerbated by the widespread "earning narrative" promoted by educational agents in Nepal, which claims, "You can earn more than 300,000 yen (approximately 1,976 USD) a month by working part-time in Japan" (Immigration Services Agency, n.d.). It encourages Nepali parents and students to take financial risks without adequately preparing for uncertainties in Japan, which often leads to considerable economic hardship and parental debt. This expectation-experience gap tends to result in precarious experiences. Although Nepali students are reported to experience numerous uncertainties and adversities, how they develop resilience strategies to navigate these challenges remains an essential but underexplored question in the existing literature.

Methodology

This study draws on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and field notes with 15 Nepali students attending Japanese language schools in the city of Hokuriku in 2023. Eight of these interviews were audio-recorded. While the recorded interviews were conducted in late 2023, the study is greatly enriched by insights from many students I met, spoke with, and observed during my three-year stay in the city and my ongoing research in the Kanto region.

When I moved to the city as part of my job in 2020 at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I encountered very few Nepali students. Surprisingly, with the easing of border restrictions in late 2022 and early 2023, I noticed many Nepali students in public spaces such as train and bus stations, supermarkets, and convenience stores. This visible surge in Nepali students in a small regional city has deepened my research interest. This led to further engagements with them to understand why and how they chose a relatively lesser-known city for international students. Background information was collected through multiple meetings with the participants before the interview recordings. After listening to their stories in an informal setting, the interviews were recorded. However, I found that students tended to be more open and expressive in unrecorded conversations than in recorded interviews. I continued data collection through interviews until recurring themes indicated that thematic saturation had been achieved (Guest et al., 2006). This study is based on the narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2022), which focuses on the importance of stories in making sense of experiences. The interviews were structured in a way that allowed open-ended conversations and encouraged participants to explore emerging topics.

Participants were initially selected through personal networks, and subsequent participants were identified through snowball sampling. The recorded sample included eight participants (five males and three females), all in their early to late twenties, from five different language schools located nearby, three of which were recently established. One school was in its first year of operation, and its student body included 60 students, fifty-nine of whom were Nepalese. All the study participants were in their first year of language school at the time of data collection. After graduation, six of them joined vocational schools (senmon gakkō) in the Tokyo and Saitama regions; one was in Osaka, and the other, who had a bachelor's degree from Nepal, has managed to secure a full-time job. I have used pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The interviews were conducted in Nepali. They were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English, drawing on my bilingual proficiency in both languages. The data were analyzed thematically by applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, entirely following the manual process. I analyzed the participants' interviews thematically through multiple rounds of listening and reading, then systematically generated initial codes, identified and reviewed themes, and finally constructed an analytic narrative that captured key patterns relevant to my research questions. The interview questions broadly covered three themes: pre-study preparation, host country experience, and post-study trajectories: (1) motivations for education mobility, (2) everyday life and institutional experiences in Japan, and (3) future aspirations. The paper draws from all eight interview insights, including those of other students I met and talked with during my three-year stay there. However, it focuses on analyzing narrative accounts in detail that offer rich insights

into the context and complexities underlying educational mobility motivations and experiences. In addition, to understand institutional perspectives on the recent developments and discourses on international students, I reviewed the policy documents, including the official websites of the Japanese government, and relied on other secondary sources.

Findings

Through an analysis of the participants' narrative accounts, four key themes emerged that highlight the sociocultural contexts influencing Nepali students' educational mobility decisions and experiences.

Aspiration for Economic Security, Safety, and Independence

Reena, a 27-year-old student, viewed educational mobility as a means of escaping prevailing socioeconomic constraints and ensuring personal independence and economic opportunities. She worked as the manager of a mobile outlet in a small city in Nepal. However, increasing dissatisfaction with her low wages led her to decide to come to Japan. Reflecting on her motivations for mobility, she stated:

> *I came to Japan because I wanted to be independent. I also had opportunities in Nepal, but we do not get a good salary for our labor. This is not enough for future savings. In addition, I have heard that Japan is the safest place for girls and would offer better opportunities.*

Reena's narrative illustrates the influence of traditional gender relations on mobility decisions. Although the dream of economic prosperity is central to Reena's migration aspirations, her mobility decision is significantly shaped and conditioned by societal gender expectations (Geddie, 2013; Martin, 2017). Reena's gendered experience, particularly in a society in which women are likely to experience some gender-based discrimination and violence, influences her decision to migrate to Japan, with safety being one of her concerns. Reena's belief that `Japan is the safest place for girls` reflects her intention to be in a place that ensures freedom, safety, and economic opportunity, which she finds lacking in her society (Tamang, 2009). This difference between her sociocultural experience of restriction and limited opportunities and her perception of Japan's modernity, which is linked to safety, autonomy, and better opportunities, motivated her to migrate to Japan. In addition, her aspiration to achieve financial independence before marriage reflects an attempt to challenge and negotiate her gender norms within the family.

Her parents' insistence on marriage before her departure to Japan highlights the persistence of traditional gender roles that expect Nepali women to remain at home or move with their husbands (Zharkevich, 2019).

> *As I experienced the hardship during my childhood, I was more committed to being self-dependent before marrying. When I decided to come to Japan, my parents insisted me to get married before I moved. Anyway, I convinced them.*

On the other hand, in the case of Rajina, educational mobility was closely tied to her family obligations. Her decision to migrate to Japan was not primarily driven by personal ambition, as in Reena's case, but rather by a sense of responsibility to support her family financially. Therefore, she faced no resistance from her parents.

> *I do not have any elder brothers. My elder sisters are already married, and I have a younger sister and brother to look after. So, I thought I should go abroad and earn, and I found Japan as the right option.*

As these narratives exemplify, their language-based educational mobility to Japan can be attributed primarily to the aspirations for greater personal autonomy, safety, and financial stability, and is increasingly embedded in a multifaceted sociocultural context (Findlay et al., 2012). When asked about their daily lives in Japan, they shared their linguistic, cultural, financial, and emotional struggles with navigating a new sociocultural environment. Despite their multiple challenges, they expressed optimism regarding the future in Japan. At the time of the interview recording, they both worked part-time at convenience stores, which they considered an opportunity to practice Japanese through everyday interactions with customers.

Educational Mobility as a Family Project

The educational mobility of Nepali students in Japan reflects not only their personal ambitions but also the collective aspirations of their families, shaped by cultural expectations and economic responsibilities (Thieme & Wyss, 2005). Families often make significant financial investments in tuition fees, expecting such education to secure a better future for their children. However, for Utsav Japan, it was not his first choice. He initially planned to migrate to another country, but after his visa was rejected, he decided to apply to Japan. When asked what motivated him to come to Japan, he shared the following narrative:

> *My parents wanted to send me to `Ramro Desh` (lit. "a good country," often referring to the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, the UK, and other European countries). I first applied to Spain, but my visa was rejected.*

For Utsav, educational mobility is not merely an individual endeavor but a collective family strategy for socioeconomic upliftment, which is also regarded as a marker of family prestige (Klaunig et al., 2024). His parents' aspiration to send him to a *Ramro Desh* (i.e., 'good country') reflects the crucial role parents play in shaping their children's mobility decisions. Utsav's parents` preference for Anglophone destinations for their son's migration highlights how parents decide on their children's migration destination. When asked about his motivation for migrating to Japan, he mentioned that it was part of his family's plan. Initially, his parents had planned to send him to Spain, which they considered a *Ramro Desh*. However, after his visa was unsuccessful, Japan became an alternative destination.

> *I paid thirty thousand Nepali rupees for documentation and a language class. I invested a total of 13 lakh Nepali rupees (approximately 9,400 USD) to come to Japan.*

Japan has become an increasingly popular option for many Nepali youth, particularly those unable to access traditional Western educational destinations (Shrestha, 2023). This trend has been further reinforced by the rapidly growing number of educational consultancies in Nepal that specifically target diverse student populations. Utsav's parents made a substantial financial investment in his migration to Japan with the hope that it would contribute to uplifting the family's socioeconomic status. The total amount Utsav spent, approximately 9,400 USD on his migration to Japan, indicates a substantial financial burden for Nepal's lower-middle-class families, many of whom rely on loans to cover the costs.

In addition, as migration has become a cultural norm in Nepali society, sending children abroad is regarded as a matter of family pride, symbolizing "progress, modernity, and cosmopolitanism" (Valentin, 2023, p. 198) and serving as a means of elevating social status in contrast to `reproducing social status` (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2012; Yang, 2018), as discussed in literature. In Utsav's case, education migration is essentially a family project planned and invested in by his parents and linked mainly to their hopes and aspirations of upward social mobility. Raman`s account also highlights the important role of family expectations and friends` networks in shaping mobility decisions.

My parents often asked me to try to migrate to the foreign country. I also thought that I had to do something for them. As my friends were also interested in coming to Japan, we decided to join the language classes.

As mobility is deeply embedded in familial hopes and aspirations for improving socioeconomic status, the participants shared that they sometimes feel pressured due to their multiple transnational responsibilities (King & Raghuram, 2013). As many Nepali students come from low-resourced socioeconomic backgrounds and rely on loans to finance their mobility to Japan, repaying these loans in Nepal while managing tuition fees for their schools in Japan presents a significant economic challenge, often leading to overwork and night shift work, and negatively impacting their performance in school. However, Kamal, the youngest participant in this study from Kathmandu, has a different story. Initially drawn to Japan through his interest in anime, he reported having fewer family obligations than the others. Nevertheless, he expressed pride in being able to send part of his earnings from part-time work to his mother.

I chose Japan over other destinations because I was greatly influenced by anime, and my parents supported my decision. Although I had been considering Japan since completing high school, I only applied after meeting a consultancy owner at my father's office, who assisted me with the entire process.

Since I started part-time work, I have regularly sent money to my mother, which gives me a sense of pride and fulfillment.

Educational Agents-Mediated Mobility

Even though multiple actors and social networks influence Nepali students` mobility decisions, commercial educational brokers appear to be at the center of their trajectory, facilitating complex mobility processes, from initial decision-making to the logistical arrangements required for studying abroad. Nepali students' vague dreams of going abroad tend to become a concrete plan after their encounter with what they repeatedly refer to as 'educational consultancies' that are rapidly mushrooming in almost all cities in Nepal (Kharel, 2022). They provide them with hope and confidence to achieve their dream of living in Japan, guaranteeing the Certificate of Eligibility (COE) and offering part-time work opportunities. All the students I spoke to rely solely on educational agents to navigate their mobility journey from school selection to documentation to flight and accommodation arrangements. The interview data revealed that complete dependency and trust in educational agents in Nepal often expose students to risks, including exorbitant service charges, false promises about opportunities in Japan, and inadequate preparation and counseling.

Rohit shared that his encounter with a school friend running an educational consultancy marked a turning point in his decision. This personal network played an influential role in persuading him to consider Japan a destination. The assurance that his friend would do all the documentation work and that no fee was needed before receiving the COE made the prospect seem low-risk, leading Rohit to agree to the process reluctantly. After a few months, his friend informed him that his school had sent the COE. However, Rohit was not optimistic about coming to Japan, as he was not mentally and financially well prepared. However, his family and relatives pressured him and regretfully shared that he reluctantly decided to come to Japan without attending Japanese-language classes. He shared his story:

When I went home for Dashain (the Nepali festival), I met a school friend, and he shared with me the idea of moving to Japan, as he had a consultancy. At first, I was not interested. My friend only asked for my academic documents and promised to prepare the other documents himself. As I was not required to pay any fees before the COE, I decided to give it a try. I did not have a passport either; he helped with that and other documentation.

As highlighted in Rohit's and Utsav's excerpt, educational agents strategically capitalize on personal relations and networks to persuade potential students (Beech, 2014), often reducing perceived barriers, for example, by offering logistic support such as preparing documentation and discounting or exempting initial fees.

> *My distant relative brother has a consultancy in Kathmandu; I joined the Japanese language class there. However, I could not attend class regularly because of the COVID-19 lockdowns (Utsav)*

The prospect of having no investment risk before the COE is confirmed presents educational mobility to Japan as a low-risk opportunity, which has attracted many youths to pursue this pathway. Although students are initially attracted by the promise of reliable and reasonable counseling services, agents charge exorbitant service fees once the COE is obtained. Rohit noted that his friend had tricked him: "*I paid 250,000 Nepali rupees (approximately 1,800 USD) as an agent fee; later, I knew it was 100,000 (approximately 720 USD) more than what my other friends had paid."* This supports the finding of a previous study by Rust (2023) that educational agents in South Asia construct a false push-pull narrative through their websites to influence students` decisions.

Rohit's narrative reveals that their profit-driven motives and sometimes undesired and unethical practices expose them to significant risks and vulnerabilities. For example, despite the Japanese Immigration Bureau's minimum requirement of 150 hours of Japanese language study to be eligible for application to the COE (Immigration Services Agency, n.d.), Rohit did not attend a single Japanese language class in Nepal because his agent prepared a fake Japanese language course completion certificate for him. Rohit regretfully shares that due to his limited Japanese language proficiency, he was compelled to leave his part-time job and struggled to keep pace with his classmates.

These student accounts reveal that the false earning narrative spread by educational consultancies in Nepal has contributed significantly to the recent surge in Nepali international students in Japan, who are motivated more by the earning prospects promoted by profit-making education agents in Nepal than by genuine educational pursuits. Indeed, the language-based Nepali migrants present an excellent case that blurs the line between education migration and labor migration, leading to a debate on whether this phenomenon represents 'migration for education' or `education for migration`.

Between Uncertainty and Optimism

Although students expressed their aspiration to study in Japan in the hope of securing a better future, their narratives revealed that they have encountered multiple forms of precarity and have become entangled in cycles of exploitation and vulnerability. This is mainly due to the marginal institutional positionality of Japanese language schools and the commercial focus of the actors involved, who facilitate mobility and operate as semi-formal infrastructures of precarity (Sato et al., 2020; Shrestha, 2023). During conversations, the students reported that they found a significant gap between their expectations about language schools and their actual experiences.

Participants from a language school, which relies heavily on Nepali students, expressed dissatisfaction with both their educational agent and the language school regarding false information, exorbitant service charges, issues with visa duration, and accommodation facilities. Many shared that they were misled about the location of their language schools. Since the students were told that their language school was in Nagoya, they prepared accordingly. However, they ended up landing at different locations. This was a common strategy adopted by educational agents in Nepal while channeling students to a particular city. The limited knowledge about the school and its location also reflects the lack of sufficient preparation on the student's part. In addition, despite their two-year language course, they said that they received a six-month visa initially, which further intensified their anxiety.

All students in our school should use the school's hostel. Before, four of us used to share a room with two beds. It was so old and dirty that there were mosquitoes all around. Now, we have moved to a new location. It is better than the earlier one, but fifty-two of us have to share a single kitchen, and the room is not worth the amount we pay. (Rohit)

Rohit's experience with substandard accommodation facilities shows how profit-driven language schools` financial gain over students` education and welfare contributes to their precarity. Sato et al. (2020) noted that the deregulation of Japanese language schools has led to the exploitation of international students, as these schools are not classified as academic institutions and therefore do not qualify for public funding or receive adequate government attention, creating a space for malfunction.

I have mixed feelings. Sometimes, because of part-time work, weekly test pressure in school, weather differences, and when I feel unhealthy, I feel it would be better to enjoy my little resources in Nepal. Also, I feel anxious and bad when I miss my family and friends in Nepal and have issues with friends here. But I feel optimistic and proud when I realize I must struggle for my future.

Similarly, Reena's emotional experience, from feeling proud of her resilience to despair over financial strain and isolation, reflects the emotional toll of navigating an uncertain future. Her struggle to repay loans while under pressure to save for vocational school tuition fees highlights the economic precarity that most low-resourced Nepali students in Japan experience. Despite their overwhelming challenges, their determination to "struggle for the future" reveals how they view their adversaries as temporary phenomena in their journey.

I took out a loan to pay my school fees, but I am struggling to pay it back on time. At the same time, I need to save tuition fees for my senmon gakkō (vocational school).

Discussion

The mobility accounts of Nepali students reflect that their mobility decision to come to Japan is primarily driven by their aspiration for a better future. It involves and is influenced by multiple factors. Unlike a previous study that indicated academic and career-driven motivations of international students in national universities in Japan (Huang & Chen, 2022), this study explores how Nepali students' mobility decisions are shaped by intertwined social, economic, and gendered factors, revealing motivations grounded in structural precarity and aspirations for socioeconomic transformation influenced by educational agents and social networks.

The results demonstrate that the motivation behind the educational mobility of Nepali students is grounded in desperation over growing unemployment and a desire to embrace a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Educational migration, essentially a family project and perceived pathway to upward socioeconomic mobility, is closely tied to the familial expectations of financial upliftment. The development of migration infrastructure, particularly the role of education consultancies, which have emerged as crucial to promoting mobility, has a considerable impact on accomplishing the mobility dream. However, the profit-driven motive of educational consultancies has often resulted in misinformation, financial exploitation, and inadequate preparation and counseling, with the projection of educational mobility as another form of labor mobility. On the other hand, the students` narratives indicated a strong sense of hope and resilience in the face of tremendous challenges. They demonstrated their ability to acquire and exercise agency while negotiating systemic limitations.

The data analysis revealed a noticeable lack of discussion regarding education and academic development among the participants. In other words, part-time employment appears to be at the center of their concern, as they need to fund their tuition fees, cover living expenses, and repay the

debts incurred to come to Japan. This suggests that students perceive educational mobility as another form of labor migration due to the consultancy-based narrative instilled in them, which focuses solely on the earning aspect of mobility before coming to Japan. Students are often presented with a rosy picture of earning enough through part-time work. However, disentangling them from this narrative is challenging, as their substantial financial investment in educational migration necessitates them to prioritize work over education. In addition, the low credential value of the institutions they attend compels them to shift their attention to an economic focus. Students prioritize immediate economic gains, knowing that their qualifications will not be translated into significant cultural or financial capital upon returning to Nepal.

Although this new educational mobility pathway, rooted in neoliberal market ideologies, has contributed to the democratization of ISM, this study demonstrates that low-resource Nepali students undertaking non-academic language courses in Japan experience multiple challenges and uncertainties. This study calls for a shift in the stereotypical portrayal of international students as subjects of economic profit to enhance their learning and overall migration experience. This study emphasizes the need for well-being perspective research and policy that recognizes the complexities and agency associated with the educational mobility of less- privileged students. This study, therefore, has significant research and policy implications. First, it suggests the need for alternative research perspectives to examine marginal educational mobility that contributes to international students` meaningful engagement in the host country, highlighting unexplored issues for further research. Second, it provides policymakers with insights into improving institutional oversight in Japanese language schools. Third, it emphasizes the need for an institutional support system, such as language assistance, career counseling, and mental health services, to address the challenges faced by Nepali and other marginalized international students.

While this study provides critical insights into the motivations and experiences of Nepali students in Japan, it has a few limitations. First, the small sample size and the concentration of participants only in Japanese language schools in a small city within the Hokuriku region restrict the generalization of the findings. Second, the study's narrow focus on the initial phases of mobility motivations and early challenges leaves gaps in understanding post-study trajectories, including how students transition into Japan's labor market and navigate workplace challenges, or reconcile their outcomes with their original aspirations for socioeconomic upliftment. These gaps highlight the need for multi-site and longitudinal research to understand how interpersonal, institutional, and structural factors influence students` migration experience and underexplored dimensions, such as in-classroom experiences, gendered dimensions, and the everyday negotiations of identity and belonging. A more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and limitations inherent in Nepal-Japan educational mobility would result from addressing these limitations.

Conclusion

This article draws on transnationalism to explore the multifaceted factors influencing the educational mobility trajectory of less-privileged Nepali students undertaking Japanese language education in Japan. The study demonstrates that the aspiration for socioeconomic mobility through better education and employment primarily drives the recent flow of Nepali students into Japanese language schools. This indicates the crucial role of the family, educational agents, and social networks in shaping their mobility decisions. The students` narratives revealed that the commercial nexus between education consultancies in Nepal and Japanese language schools in Japan pushes them into cycles of vulnerability. Their transnational obligations and responsibilities further exacerbated these precarities.

The study suggests an emerging trend of non-elite student mobility for language courses in non-traditional destinations facilitated by the educational markets. This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it distinguishes the Japanese language school students from those in universities or other academic institutions to avoid the risk of overgeneralization. It provides a

more nuanced understanding of their distinct experiences. Second, it points out the limitations of the conventional push-pull model in explaining the decision-making processes of low-resourced student populations; instead, it adopts a transnational framework to capture the complexity of their motivations. Third, it emphasizes the importance of student well-being for meaningful engagement in the host society and calls for a more humanistic approach to research and policymaking, one that recognizes international students` capacity for resilience and transformation. Finally, this study identifies the need for further research into the unexplored terrain of language-based educational mobility to deepen the understanding of this growing phenomenon.

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Emergent Conceptual Definition and Development of a Confucian Heritage Culture Scale for Malaysian Chinese Pre-University Students

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Abstract: *This article describes the development of a Confucian heritage culture (CHC) scale, where a conceptual definition of CHC emerged from interdisciplinary perspectives. The scale dimensions adopted interdisciplinary perspectives from history, psychology, political science, and science education. The validity and reliability of the scale were determined. Statistical analysis, conducted through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), suggested a four-factor CHC dimension in a sample of 430 Chinese pre-university chemistry students. The four-factor dimensions were (1) being principled, (2) dependence on the teacher, (3) harmony, and (4) education. The proposed dimensions were then confirmed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with an additional sample of 441 students. The findings were also supported by prior qualitative research, which showed that CHC was associated with being principled, dependence on the teacher, harmony, and education. Based upon confirmed dimensions, the emergent CHC was conceptually defined. The implications for educational policy and practice are discussed.*

Keywords: *Chinese values, Confucian heritage culture, chemistry education, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), scale development*

Introduction

East Asian countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, underwent thalidomide-related issues from the early 1960s to the 1990s (Craddock, 2022). Moreover, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, Macau, Vietnam, Hong Kong, China, and Korea were the top performers in mathematics and science in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test in 2015 (Meng et al., 2023). These East Asian countries appear to share no other common characteristics besides a strong Confucian heritage culture (CHC), which contributes to their extraordinary mathematics and science learning performances (Craddock, 2022).

Confucianism teaching and the Chinese values inherent in the CHC affect the students' characteristics and worldview perception, which could exist in any classroom setting. In this article, the chemistry classroom was the primary focus. Researchers were paying increasing attention to the effect of Confucian heritage culture on learning. Most previous studies had investigated cultural influences on the perception of these Chinese values (Chen, 2023; Siah et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2023), compared

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and contrasted these values from CHC with Western values (Le, 2024; Ryan, 2016), identified and clarified paradoxes and misconceptions about CHC (Lang & Jing-Schmidt, 2024; Yu et al., 2023; Zhang, 2013) and investigated the learning approach and learning style of CHC students (Foong & Daniel, 2013; Hua & Wang, 2023). However, past literature has not considered the importance of CHC from an integrated perspective of philosophical, psychological, political science, and science education perspectives. Existing research lacks an instrument to measure the dimensionality of constructs and conceptually define the characteristics of CHC from an integrated perspective.

To avoid misconceptions, it is crucial to distinguish the concept of Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) from classical Confucian philosophy. This article defines CHC not as a static historical doctrine, but as a dynamic and experienced set of beliefs and attitudes that have evolved within modern Chinese communities, particularly in educational contexts. The study focused on Malaysian pre-university Chinese students' learning in chemistry, thereby responding to the call for more context-specific studies, especially those that have been underexplored in previous research. Developing and validating a higher-order CHC construct will contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of cross-cultural influences in education. Hence, the study aimed to address this gap by conceptually defining the CHC construct and developing a CHC measurement scale that captures its multidimensional nature. Thus far, dimensions of a CHC construct have not been compiled, conceptualised, and attested quantitatively as a whole in a single model or definition. The following discussion will unfold how dimensions of the CHC construct were identified from the literature for the study.

CHC Dimensions in Literature

Confucianism has deeply influenced Chinese culture over the centuries, particularly within the family and community. To better understand Chinese culture, it is essential to grasp the fundamental principles underlying Confucian teachings (Hong et al., 2022; Wu & Lee, 2021). These are now discussed

Confucianism and Hierarchy/Social order

Confucianism emphasises hierarchy and social order. It promotes the idea of filial piety and ritual rites, giving parents authority over their children. This is reflected in a verse from the Analects (the English text of the translation is provided at the bottom of the Chinese verse):

> 齐景公问政於孔子。孔子对曰：‘君君，臣臣，父父，子子。’
> 景公曰：‘善哉！信如君不君，臣不臣，父不父，子不子，虽有栗，吾得而食诸？’
>
> Translation: Duke Jing of Qi asked the Master about governing. The Master replied, "Ruler, minister, father, son." The Duke said, "Wonderful! If the ruler is not like a ruler, the minister is not like a minister; the father is not like a father, the son is not like a son, then even if there were food, would I get to eat?"

Hierarchy and respect are closely tied in Chinese culture. Hofstede's study linked the high Power Distance Index (PDI) to hierarchical systems with existential inequality (Hofstede et al., 2010; Primecz, 2025). China, Singapore, and Malaysia exhibit high PDI scores, reflecting significant acceptance of unequal power distribution, especially in family settings. Hofstede's study suggests that the power distance observed in different countries stems from family values, which are then carried over into other aspects of life.

Respect for elders and teachers is a fundamental virtue in CHC. Students are expected to show respect to teachers by standing up and greeting them when they enter the classroom. They also wait to speak until permitted. Tran (2013) interviewed CHC students. His findings revealed that,

although students agreed teachers should be respected, this did not mean they were passive or obedient. Thus, does *respect* contribute to the characteristics of students with a CHC background?

Confucianism and Knowledge

Confucianism stressed the importance of education and self-cultivation in its teachings. For example, Zhu Xi (朱熹) was renowned as one of the leading Confucian scholars during the Neo-Confucian era. He stressed the importance of education and self-cultivation for learning so that one can understand the principle (human nature) and energy (气). He had related his teaching of the School of Principle (理学) with the Great Learning in Book of Rites《礼记。大学》, as reflected in the following verse:

> 物格而后知至；之至而后意诚；意诚而后心正；心正而后身修；身修而后家齐；家齐而后国治；国治而后天下平；自天子以至于庶人。
>
> Translation: Extending knowledge and investigating things to acquire knowledge and education, then to sincerity, then to a right mind and heart, to the cultivation of the person, to the taking care of the family, and governing the people properly, and peace for all will be achieved.

CHC, grounded in Confucian values, continued to highly value education. In a paper review on higher education in East Asia and Singapore, tuition costs funded by households rather than the state had been increasing, indicating the high attention given by families to education (Jiang et al., 2022).

Consequently, there has been debate over the motivational drive, specifically extrinsic motivation versus intrinsic motivation, among CHC students; however, CHC students are more appropriately regarded as possessing achievement motivation (Qian & Lau, 2024).

Through the re-examination of the complexities of the Chinese education system in feudal dynasties as well as contemporary China and rapid social change in Asian societies, the examination heritage has been revealed as playing a dominant role (Steare et al., 2023), however there has been debate whether it is the influence of Confucianism or the influence of mass examination system due to modernisation that had caused the examination competition (Jiang et al., 2022). One is reminded not to be "over-confucianised" over the research area of CHC. The question is, does *education* contribute to the characteristics of students with a CHC background?

Confucianism and Perseverance

For Confucians like Zhuxi and others in the Confucian tradition, education and self-improvement were top priorities. Moreover, they taught that the way to achieve this was through sheer perseverance – having that 'do not give up' attitude (Rainey, 2010). Perseverance is essential to Chinese students because it shows their ability to push themselves to become better people. It is also an important aspect of virtue according to Confucianism and is key to succeeding in life. A person needs perseverance to see tasks through to completion. Even under extreme circumstances, such as a lack of materials or support, perseverance is highly valued as a trait for success. Past research indicates that Chinese students with a strong sense of perseverance are better at delaying gratification, in contrast to those students who lack this trait and seek immediate gratification (Gao et al., 2025; G. Li, 2025).

Within Chinese communities, parental influence — the way parents raise their children often reflects traditional Confucian teachings that emphasise the virtues of diligence, perseverance, self-reliance, and duty (G. Li, 2025). In Confucian philosophy, it is also emphasised that educational achievements are determined not solely by innate talent, but also by a person's effort, determination, perseverance, and patience (Gao et al., 2025; Steare et al., 2023). Empirical evidence from Li's (2025) research indicated that CHC students, when faced with academic problems, begin to solve the problems with great perseverance. Western researchers agreed that perseverance is rooted in Confucian values.

The concept of perseverance is closely related to Long-Term Orientation (LTO) in the context of Chinese values. According to Hofstede's research, countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and China exhibit varying degrees of LTO. A low LTO score is seen in Malaysia. This phenomenon contrasts with the high LTO scores found in Singapore and China, which have large Chinese populations. LTO is regarded as possessing perseverance in the face of slow results, a sense of shame, and respect for circumstances and others, which aligns with past literature's findings (Dai & Chen, 2024; Hofstede et al., 2010). Perseverance in the high LTO pole reflects Confucian teachings. Thus, this article justifies the need to measure the degree of perseverance within Chinese communities in Malaysia with a CHC background.

Confucianism and Teachers

In China, the influence of Confucianism has led to the development of the examination culture. This examination culture has persisted through different dynasties and has even influenced many other Western countries, such as France and Germany (Xiao et al., 2023).

Research has shown that students from a Chinese cultural background are heavily reliant on teachers, preferring a teacher-centred teaching style and showing reluctance to participate in group discussions. Students often see their teachers as the ultimate authority of knowledge, with little regard for the views of their peers. In a qualitative research study conducted by Liu and Feng (2015), teachers, elderly persons, or even textbooks were regarded as authorities of knowledge. It had been deeply ingrained in students' minds that the correct answers could only exist in teachers' minds or in books. This leads to the question of whether the *dependence on teachers* affects students from a Chinese cultural background.

Confucianism and Conflict

Confucius advocates that real learning occurs when one learns through active reflection, questioning, and seeking answers by observing *li* (manners) — the rules of proper behaviour. The Confucian philosophy does not support the concept of spoon-feeding and relying solely on the teacher to preserve their dignity. The concept of maintaining harmony, avoiding conflict, and saving face has been reflected in various CHC literature sources (Dai & Chen, 2024; Xu et al., 2024). As such, driven by the cultural emphasis on social harmony, Asian students often tend to avoid conflict in face-to-face classroom environments to preserve social harmony (Le, 2024). The result of this cultural phenomenon has contributed to a hierarchical teachers-students relationship, with students who tend to accept the teachers' answers without questioning or challenging them (Liu & Feng, 2015). Consequently, students lack the opportunity and the courage to communicate fully with their teacher. Moreover, teachers do not expect students to provide innovative ideas, but instead want them to memorise correct answers and follow preset procedures in the hope that students will make fewer mistakes (Hong et al., 2022).

In an interview conducted by Tran (2013), a student mentioned the importance of saving the teacher's face, which led him to avoid confronting the teacher in class; instead, he chose to discuss the matter with his peers or approach the teacher after class to clarify his understanding.

The concept of harmony has been associated with low Individualism (IDV) in Hofstede's study (Hofstede et al., 2010; Primecz, 2025). With a low IDV score, countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and China are considered collectivist societies, characterised by strong family relationships and a tendency to avoid conflict (Chen, 2023; Saravanamuthu, 2008). Hofstede's study also measures the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) to determine the degree of tolerance for uncertain situations. Malaysia, Singapore, and China display relatively low UAI scores, indicating resistance to change and a preference for active learning situations (Kim & Lee, 2025; Yang & Lin, 2023).

When considering the IDV and UAI scores of these three countries, the existing research on CHC learners appears to contradict Hofstede's findings, particularly for Singapore and China (Craddock,

2022; Gao et al., 2025). Several studies have demonstrated that CHC students may be reluctant to participate in active learning due to a combination of factors, including fear of being ridiculed, shyness, low confidence, and a desire to maintain harmony and avoid conflict (Dai & Chen, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). Additionally, *dependence on teachers* and issues of *respect* may lead students to adopt a passive approach to *maintaining harmony* and saving face with their teachers and peers.

Considering these observations, the question arises: Does the aspect of *harmony* significantly influence students with a CHC background?

Other constructs

The constructs for this study were derived from a review of other relevant scales (Table 1) and by analysing the existing research and consensus within the CHC literature (Table 2).

Although The Chinese Culture Connection (1987) has developed the Chinese Values Survey (CVS) to measure 40 Chinese values (for example, filial piety, being hardworking, perseverance, humility), and contributed to the development of the Values Survey Module (VSM), the researcher through repeated discussion with experts found that not all the 40 Chinese values applied to the context of learning in the classroom. The researcher compared the items and constructs from CVS and VSM and found that these items and constructs were mainly parallel with the five themes (i.e., Respect, Perseverance, Dependence on Teacher, Harmony, and Education).

Table 1. Selected Past Studies Relevant to the Dimensions of a CHC Scale

Constructs	Past studies
Respect	(Hofstede et al., 2010; Le, 2024; Tran, 2013; Xiao et al., 2023)
Education	(Hsu, 2021; Pham, 2021; Pham & Pham, 2021; Steare et al., 2023; Yuen et al., 2017)
Perseverance	(Gao et al., 2025; G. Li, 2025; R. Li, 2025; Xiao et al., 2023)
Teacher dependence	(N. J. Kim et al., 2022; Le, 2024; J. Wang, 2013; Xu et al., 2024; Zhan, 2021)
Harmony	(Dai & Chen, 2024; Gao et al., 2025; Hsu, 2021; Le, 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2024)

Source: Compiled by authors

Table 2. Selected Past Studies Relevant to Chinese Values Scale

Author(s)	Year	Scale	Target group (sample)	Constructs	Total of items
Siah et al.	2015	Adopted Chinese Value Survey, CVS	Malaysian Chinese secondary students	Integrity and tolerance Confucian ethos Loyalty to ideals and humanity Moderation and moral discipline	40
Wu, Taylor, & Chen	2001	Developed new scale and adapted Values Survey Module, VSM	Taiwanese public relations practitioners	Press agentry Public information Two-way asymmetrical Two way symmetrical Personal influence Cultural interpreter Power distance Uncertainty avoidance Femininity Masculinity Individualism Collectivism	48

Table 2. Selected Past Studies Relevant to Chinese Values Scale (continued)

Author(s)	Year	Scale	Target group (sample)	Constructs	Total of items
Matthews	2000	Adopted Chinese Value Survey, CVS	Sojourners to Australia	Integrity and tolerance Confucian ethos Loyalty to ideals and humanity Moderation and moral discipline	40
The Chinese Culture Connection	1987	Developed Chinese Value Survey, CVS	Chinese university students	Integration Confucian work dynamism Human-heartedness Moral discipline	40
Hofstede	1984	Developed Values Survey Module, VSM	Chinese	Power distance Uncertainty avoidance Femininity-masculinity Individualism-collectivism	

Source: Compiled by authors

The article will now turn to how the final dimensions of the CHC construct were conceptualised and the scale developed.

Method and Procedures

Sample

The development of the CHC measuring scale was conducted in two phases, and data were collected from two independent samples (the first sample consisted of 430 students, and the second sample consisted of 441 students) from several higher education institutions and schools in Malaysia. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was adopted in both samples when recruiting the participants (Chuah et al., 2015; Himschoot, 2012; Ting et al., 2015). These measures substantially helped achieve the study's goal of representing a well-defined population: Malaysian Chinese pre-university chemistry students. While acknowledging that purposive sampling challenges the assumption of independence, which is an implicit requirement for specific inferential statistics, and yet random sampling was not feasible for accessing this specific population, the researcher has taken several measures to promote the independence of respondents. The survey process was facilitated by a research assistant who was not affiliated with the institution to maintain neutrality. The respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept anonymous and confidential.

When recruiting participants, only pre-university Chinese students were selected. The participants were recruited from a cohort of students across three large pre-university institutions. The selection of Chinese pre-university students within the chemistry context was a deliberate methodological decision. The pre-university education level is deemed a critical developmental stage in the Chinese educational system because it is often characterised by intense academic pressure (e.g., preparation for the academic examination) where cultural values profoundly shape students' learning attitudes, motivation, and well-being (Jiang et al., 2022; Steare et al., 2023).

In addition, a few inclusion criteria were adopted in this study to ensure the sample's homogeneity:

(1) The participants for this study must have registered for chemistry in the pre-university science programmes.
(2) The participants must be Chinese.

(3) The participants' parents must be able to speak and/or read Chinese.
(4) The participants must have provided informed consent.

Students who did not meet all four criteria were excluded from the analysis. The criteria for including parental ability to speak and/or read Chinese aim to reflect the level of CHC of participants, as past literature has pointed out that parental and family influence have greatly impacted CHC's ways of respecting the elderly, commitment to education, and the need to persevere.

The researcher obtained research ethics clearance (Approval Number: 2017-5-30) from the Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology Research Ethics Committee. The participants were briefed and gave written consent before starting the survey.

The data for both samples were collected via a paper-based survey method. The first sample consisted of 430 students recruited voluntarily from different pre-university programmes, i.e. Form 6, A-Level, Diploma, and Foundation programmes. There were 241 males and 189 females (56% and 44%) between the ages of 18 and 20 (248 aged 18 (57.7%), 141 aged 19 (32.8%), 41 aged 20 (9.5%)). The sample represented the 13 states and 1 Federal Territory of Malaysia. The second sample, also recruited voluntarily, consisted of 441 students. There were 283 males and 158 females (64.2% and 35.8%) between the ages of 18 and 20 (378 aged 18 (85.7%), 48 aged 19 (10.9%), and 15 aged 20 (3.4%)). This second sample also represented nine states and one federal territory of Malaysia.

Procedures

The CHC Scale was developed as a data collection tool to assess the extent to which Chinese pre-university chemistry students demonstrate CHC dimensions. The scale development process can be stated in six steps: (1) identifying dimensions, (2) generating an item pool, (3) inclusion of items, (4) pretest, (5) first version of the scale, and (6) second version of the scale.

Step 1: Identifying Dimensions

To associate a theoretical concept of CHC that explains the complex context of CHC, the researcher conducted a comprehensive iterative review of the past literature to understand the underlying dimensions of CHC. To achieve this, several other relevant scales were reviewed, drawing on research related to CHC and common agreements among studies on CHC. Subsequently, five dimensions were derived and proposed from the literature, namely (1) respect, (2) perseverance, (3) dependence on the teacher, (4) harmony, and (5) education.

Step 2: Generating Item Pool

In the second step, an item pool with 30 items was generated based on the five proposed dimensions identified in the first step. Centred on the established guidelines found in past literature, it can be said that more items were not necessarily better, but using a single item was not a good alternative; hence, a minimum of three items per dimension was recommended (Diamantopoulos et al., 2012; Hayduk & Littvay, 2012).

Step 3: Inclusion of Items

In the third step, a panel of four experts from the fields of Confucianism and Chinese studies, active learning, and chemistry education examined the item pool for content and face validity. Lecturers and/or teachers in these fields who have at least 3 years of experience were contacted to form the panel, provided they consented and were willing to participate in this research. The consultation with the expert panel was conducted through an interview and a questionnaire. After the experts' in-depth examination of each item and after receiving their feedback, some items were revised

in terms of their grammar and structure. For instance, "For lack of confidence, one might choose not to be actively involved" was changed to "In a conflict, I would choose to remain silent as I lack confidence in myself." Consequently, the first version of the scale consisted of 30 items.

Step 4: Pretesting

In the fourth step, following expert validation, two cognitive interviews using a debriefing method were conducted with a purposively selected sample of 10 pre-university students who were representative of the target population but did not participate in the main study. This step is vital to ensure that targeted respondents can understand the instructions and statements (Neuert & Lenzner, 2015). Findings from the cognitive pretesting suggested there is no need to revise any part of the items.

Step 5: First Version of the Scale

In this fifth step, the first version of the scale was finalised. The scale was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree," 2 indicating "disagree," 3 indicating "neutral," 4 indicating "agree," and 5 indicating "strongly agree." The first version of the questionnaire was administered to 430 students. The CHC Scale was developed and administered in the English language. This decision was made because English is the primary medium of instruction in the Malaysian pre-university program where the study was conducted, and the participants were proficient in the language. To mitigate any potential threats to trustworthiness arising from language, the cognitive interviews specifically probed for any difficulties in comprehending or interpreting the English-language items. Data was analysed using the IBM SPSS 20 software for the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

Step 6: Second Version of the Scale

In this step, the second version of the questionnaire was administered to 441 students following the completion of EFA. The data were analysed using SmartPLS 3 software for measurement and structural model analyses.

Result

Phase I - Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Before analysis, the data were screened and cleaned, during which any cases with missing data were discarded. The assumptions of EFA were checked and verified. The sample size was deemed adequate, meeting the minimum requirement of five cases per construct (Hair & Alamer, 2022), and there were no extreme outliers (Pallant, 2020). Although the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed a violation of normality, a common occurrence with large sample sizes, the Normal Q-Q Plot confirmed that the data were normally distributed. Thus, the distribution of data was considered reasonably normal.

EFA was performed on the 30 items using Principal Components Analysis with Promax rotation to identify the underlying dimensions of the CHC Scale. The suitability of data for factor analysis was confirmed by a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.84, which exceeded the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1970, 1974), and a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954; Hair & Alamer, 2022). In accordance with established literature (Matsunaga, 2010; Sarstedt et al., 2023), items were eliminated if they had factor loadings below 0.3, exhibited cross-loadings over 0.1, demonstrated item-total correlations of below 0.3 in reliability analysis (Hair, Black et al., 2014) or were inconsistent with the theoretical basis of the scale.

Six items were eliminated individually, and four factors with an eigenvalue greater than one were extracted. Based on the literature review, five dimensions were initially proposed: (1) respect,

(2) education, (3) perseverance, (4) dependence on the teacher, and (5) harmony. Following the EFA, items designed initially for 'respect' and 'perseverance' were found to have high cross-loadings and clustered into a single factor. This new factor, which captures a sense of duty, persistence, and responsibility, was labelled 'Principled' to reflect its comprehensive nature better. Thus, upon conducting EFA, they were labelled as principled, dependent on the teacher, and focused on harmony and education. All items had a loading of more than 0.3 in their corresponding factors. The item-to-total correlations ranged from 0.3 to 0.9. Appendix A shows the results of EFA. The total variance explained was 49.18%, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.60, which is above the acceptable threshold for an exploratory study (Hair & Alamer, 2022; Hair, Black et al., 2014).

Phase II – Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM)

Assessment of the reflective measurement model

The measurement model was evaluated using composite reliability (CR), factor loading, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. As shown in Appendix B, the CR values met the minimum requirement of 0.6, an acceptable value since this study aimed to explore the key target dimensions of CHC and develop theories in CHC, which was exploratory research (Amusa & Hossana, 2024; Hair, Black et al., 2014). Besides, the loadings of all indicators exceeded the recommended value of 0.5 (Hair, 2016). Likewise, the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the threshold value 0.5 (Sarstedt et al., 2023).

Discriminant validity was assessed using cross-loadings, the Fornell-Lacker criterion, and Henseler's heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion. The results revealed that the outer-loading of each indicator was greater on its respective construct than its cross-loadings on other constructs, and no cross-loading scores differed by ≤0.1. This denoted that each item clearly defined one construct. Using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the results revealed that the square root of AVE of each construct was greater than the correlations with other constructs in the model. According to the HTMT criterion, the results showed that the HTMT values for all constructs are below 0.85 and 0.90. In conclusion, the result analysis indicated that the discriminant validity was achieved.

Assessment of formative second-order construct analysis

In EFA, the term for a latent variable is a dimension. Conversely, the standard term for a latent variable in PLS-SEM is a construct. This section will use the term 'construct' to refer to latent variables within the context of PLS-SEM.

To examine the convergent validity of this formative second-order construct of CHC, the path coefficient was 0.720, more than the recommended value of 0.60 (Chin, 1998; Sarstedt et al., 2023); thus, the formatively measured constructs had sufficient degrees of convergent validity. Besides, the multicollinearity between indicators was assessed. The predictors of CHC constructs (DEP, EDU, HAR, RDI) satisfy the inner VIF values, and they were consistently between the threshold value of 0.5 –3.3 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006; Sarstedt et al., 2023). Thus, it can be concluded that collinearity did not reach critical levels in the formative construct.

Lastly, the significance and relevance of the outer weights of the formative constructs were examined. All weights exceeded the recommended value of 0.1 (Lohmöller, 1989) and had significant t-values. Therefore, the results analysis provided empirical support for retaining all the indicators (Hair, 2014).

Discussion

An emergent conceptualisation of CHC from the study can be defined as the extent of experienced culture (beliefs and attitudes) to which people of Chinese descent share strong Confucian heritage

characteristics in being principled, being dependent on teachers, being inclined to harmony, and placing importance on education.

Subsequently, the study developed a scale to measure the extent of CHC characteristics experienced by Chinese pre-university chemistry students. In doing so, a firm process was followed to explore the dimensions of CHC and provide a reliable and valid scale. Results from the EFA suggested a four-factor structure for the CHC Scale, using a sample of 430 Chinese pre-university students. Then, the proposed factor structure was confirmed by PLS-SEM with a different sample of 441 Chinese pre-university students. The reliability statistics demonstrated that the current scale had good internal consistency.

The emergence of the 'Principled' factor, integrating aspects of perseverance and respect, suggests that for our student sample, these concepts are not separate but are fused into a single characteristic of dutiful commitment. The descriptive analyses revealed a very high mean score for the dimension of "Principled." Following the past literature (Chen, 2023; Yu et al., 2023), they have also mentioned that the Chinese community, including the students and parents, highly regards respect. The virtue of being principled and persistent, as stressed in the Analects by Confucius, was upheld in education and other areas, including many Confucian business corporations. Therefore, the finding on the dimension of Principled represents part of the characteristics of CHC.

The findings in this study support the dimension of Dependence on Teacher, as it represents a characteristic of CHC. The finding was unexpected, as Dependence on the Teacher was not the teaching of Confucianism but rather a characteristic formed in the CHC community through rapid social change and modernisation within Asian culture. Nevertheless, this finding aligns with past literature assertions that the CHC literature should be drawn from the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, and political science (Choong, 2019). Therefore, unexpectedly, the findings confirmed that the Dependence on Teacher dimension was measuring and representing part of the characteristics of CHC.

The study found that the Harmony dimension represents part of the characteristics of CHC. Chinese students viewed non-confrontational communication and conflict avoidance as necessary, a view consistent with past literature. However, the mean score of this Harmony dimension appeared to be "neutral," which challenges the traditional beliefs. Nonetheless, the study confirmed that the Harmony dimension measures part of CHC's characteristics.

The findings in the present study provide statistical evidence that aligns with those of previous studies examining the importance of education and self-cultivation in the context of CHC (Gao et al., 2025; Jiang et al., 2022; Tan, 2013). It was encouraging to observe that the respondents highly regard education and view it as a means of self-education to pursue one's own goals and achieve personal success (Wang & Rao, 2022). Chinese students view educational success as a means to a better life and a more fulfilling education as essential in CHC (Jiang et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, the Education dimension represents a key characteristic of CHC.

This study diverges from past literature by assessing CHC as an integrated formative construct rather than as separate dimensions. The measurement model was successfully validated using PLS-SEM, confirming that the CHC construct comprises four reflective first-order constructs: being principled, dependence on the teacher, harmony, and valuing education. This four-factor structure aligns with recent qualitative findings, thereby establishing the construct validity of the new CHC Scale.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the modern psychology of CHC students reflects a modified version of classical Confucianism. The values and beliefs of today's students are not solely based on ancient teachings but have evolved through the influence of various historical, psychological, and modern educational perspectives. This indicates that contemporary CHC is a dynamic cultural construct, distinct from its original philosophical form.

Limitations of the Study

The main constraints of this research stem from the nature of the sample and the instrumentation. The generalisability of this study is constrained by the use of a purposive sample, which consisted solely of Malaysian students who, in turn, exhibited significant internal diversity in CHC exposure due to varied educational backgrounds, such as vernacular, national, and independent school systems. Furthermore, the administration of the questionnaire in English, while practical, could have resulted in a loss of subtle cultural nuances that a native-language instrument might have captured.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, this study conceptualised the definition for the CHC construct and developed and validated a comprehensive CHC Scale. The emergent CHC construct in this study is defined as the extent of experienced culture (beliefs and attitudes) to which people of Chinese descent share strong Confucian heritage characteristics in being principled, being dependent on teachers, being inclined to harmony, and placing importance on education.

The primary implication of this study is the provision of a validated instrument for educators and researchers, which has direct applications for pedagogical practice. The CHC scale can be used to (a) identify specific cultural learning orientations in students (e.g., high 'Dependence on Teacher'), allowing for tailored pedagogical approaches like structured scaffolding; (b) facilitate cross-cultural research by providing a quantitative measure of CHC; and (c) help students and teachers in multicultural classrooms better understand their own and others' educational perspectives. An important pedagogical implication of this study for educators, is that the understanding of students' 'dependence on the teacher' is a key cultural characteristic. Rather than viewing it as passivity, it can be seen as a readiness for structured guidance. Therefore, teaching strategies that combine explicit instruction with scaffolded opportunities for independent inquiry may be particularly effective.

Beyond the classroom, the conceptualised CHC construct bridges theory and educational policy by challenging the deficit-based model assumptions that often underpin policy decisions. Historically, traits like 'dependence on the teacher' have been misconstrued as a universal weakness to be corrected. This study provides the empirical evidence to reframe these traits as valid characteristics of a coherent cultural learning orientation. This gives policymakers a data-driven justification to shift from "one-size-fits-all" mandates to more equitable, evidence-based policies. The result is the promotion of an educational system designed to leverage the inherent strengths of all learners, rather than forcing them to conform to a single, culturally-specific model of success.

Notes:

1. Portions of the literature review and data in this study are extracted from the first author's doctoral dissertation, with a significant addition and update of data. All reused text has been thoroughly paraphrased to reflect current analysis. The original source is: Choong, S. H. (2019). Relationship between Confucian heritage culture and preference to active learning among Chinese pre-university students [Doctoral dissertation, Universiti Malaya].
2. The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix A. Factor Structure and Reliability Analysis for the CHC Scale with 4-Factor Model and 24 Items.

Item code	Items	Factor	Item loading (threshold >0.3)	Item communalities (threshold >0.3)	Cronbach's alpha (threshold >0.6)	Minimum CITC (threshold >0.3)
Res1	Greeting my teacher is a sign of respect.	1	.605	.454	0.848	0.349
Res2	Following instructions or orders from teachers is a sign of having confidence in the teacher.		.569	.413		
Res3	I show respect for my teacher by being polite to him/her.		.700	.559		
Res4	Adapting to behaviours and patterns of groupmates ensures that the group is able to perform better.		.590	.395		
Res5	Support for one another is important to ensure the group is working well.		.746	.545		
Res6	Tolerance of each other is important for the success of a group.		.707	.490		
Per1	Perseverance is an important trait in a student.		.749	.588		
Per2	Persistence is a good characteristic of a student.		.642	.470		
Per3	Students who persevere will eventually enjoy success in the end.		.502	.424		
Per4	Perseverance and not relying on the teacher alone will eventually lead me to learning more.		.366	.398		
Edu2	My family highly expects me to have obtained knowledge from my studies.	2	.401	.347	0.777	0.427
Edu3	I study hard so that I can achieve good grades.		.604	.542		
Edu4	I hope I can bring pride to my family with good results.		.680	.582		
Edu5	With good results, I can get a good job with a good salary to take care of my family.		.732	.613		
Edu6	Getting good result may help me to pursue my dream job.		.724	.597		
Dep2	I am fully dependent on teachers to provide me with answers.	3	.752	.644	0.743	0.415
Dep3	I am fully dependent on teachers to provide me with guidance.		.740	.643		
Dep5	I prefer to rely upon my teachers to provide extra reference rather than to look for myself.		.653	.586		
Dep6	Other sources of knowledge recommended by teachers are more reliable compared to references found by students.		.456	.433		

Appendix A. Factor Structure and Reliability Analysis for the CHC Scale with 4-Factor Model and 24 Items (continued).

Item code	Items	Factor	Item loading (threshold >0.3)	Item communalities (threshold >0.3)	Cronbach's alpha (threshold >0.6)	Minimum CITC (threshold >0.3)
Har1	In a conflict, I would choose to remain silent as I lack confidence in myself.	4	.400	.371	0.682	0.388
Har2	A person who is shy in nature will not choose to be actively involved in a learning activity.		.526	.439		
Har3	A person who is to avoid conflict will choose not to voice their opinions.		.705	.570		
Har4	In order to not humiliate someone, I will choose not to correct another person even when he/she is wrong.		.517	.442		
Har5	Being timid or shy in nature, one might choose to remain silent so as not to draw attention.		.563	.459		

Appendix B. Assessment of Internal Consistency, Indicator Reliability, and Convergent Validity of the Final Measurement Model

Construct	Indicator	Loading (threshold > 0.5)	Cronbach's alpha	rho A	CR (threshold > 0.6)	AVE (threshold >0.5)	Convergent validity
Principled (RDI)	Res1	0.683	0.865	0.868	0.895	0.516	Yes
	Res2	0.700					
	Res3	0.784					
	Res5	0.714					
	Res6	0.653					
	Per1	0.809					
	Per2	0.755					
	Per3	0.633					
Dependence on Teacher (DEP)	Dep2	0.658	0.714	0.729	0.810	0.517	Yes
	Dep3	0.755					
	Dep5	0.716					
	Dep6	0.744					
Harmony (HAR)	Har2	0.584	0.648	0.709	0.800	0.577	Yes
	Har3	0.833					
	Har5	0.835					
Education (EDU)	Edu2	0.622	0.791	0.800	0.857	0.547	Yes
	Edu3	0.750					
	Edu4	0.805					
	Edu5	0.779					
	Edu6	0.729					

BOOK REVIEW

Reclaiming the Teaching Discourse in Higher Education: Curating a Diversity of Theory and Practice. By Ian M. Kinchin (Ed) (2025). 234 pages. ISBN: 9781350411470 (print), London: Bloomsbury Academic. £ 63 (GBP) (hardcover)

In *Reclaiming the Teaching Discourse in Higher Education*, Ian Kinchin offers a critical and creative reimagining of university teaching amid neoliberal pressures and global uncertainty. Centering teaching as a relational, ethical, and co-creative act, the book challenges standardized, metric-driven practices and advocates for pedagogies rooted in care, embodiment, and ecological awareness. Across eleven chapters, Kinchin critiques current academic structures, explores teachers' lived experiences, and proposes transformative alternatives. The book ultimately serves as both a critique and a guide, inviting educators to reclaim teaching as a dynamic, hopeful force for social and institutional change.

Chapters 1 to 5 evaluate the current state of teaching in higher education, advocating for more relational, dynamic, and human-centered approaches. Chapter 1 reconceptualizes belonging not as a fixed emotional state but as a dynamic, relational, and embodied process shaped by social, material, and emotional interactions. It emphasizes how teachers foster belonging through micro-moments of connection, counterspaces of care, and counternarratives of resistance. Chapter 2 challenges static views of 'lived experience', advocating for a dynamic understanding of 'living experiences'. Teaching should be a process of becoming, and pedagogy is supposed to provide spaces for ethical and inclusive engagement. Chapter 3 highlights post-observation feedback as a collaborative and reflective practice that supports continuous professional development, urging a shift away from judgment toward dialogue. In Chapter 4, insights from other professions offer valuable enlightenment and inspiration for teaching, demonstrating that teaching should not be confined to formal educators but can be enriched by views from diverse occupations. Chapter 5 calls for the integration of humanizing pedagogies to support student well-being, arguing that care-centered teaching is essential in the face of increasing mental health challenges. Collectively, these chapters challenge traditional teaching norms, urging a rethinking of higher education teaching from the perspective of care, connection and adaptability.

Chapters 6 to 9 present a shift from critique to creativity, envisioning new ways of teaching that prioritize embodiment, spatiality, co-agency, and sustainability. In chapter 6, the author criticizes the neoliberal rationality that is widely spread in the discourse of higher education policy, especially the uncritical embrace of digital technologies under the guise of 'enhancement'. Through the concept of 'McPolicy', the author reveals how dehumanized and repetitive policy language erases educators' agency and advocates a post-digital approach rooted in lived experience, inclusiveness, and critical engagement with identity and power. Chapter 7 extends the criticism to the ecological crisis, arguing that higher education has failed to respond meaningfully due to disciplinary fragmentation and neoliberal inertia. Therefore, it calls for an 'ecological university' that embraces interdisciplinary studies and environmental consciousness. Chapter 8 discusses the stagnation of curriculum theory, arguing that dominant and counter-hegemonic curriculum traditions remain Eurocentric. To move beyond this, the author proposes Itinerant Curriculum Theory (ICT), which is a decolonized relational framework that emphasizes epistemological diversity and justice-oriented practice. Chapter 9 criticizes neoliberal ideas that treat students as consumers, reducing education to a transactional service. In response, it advocates collaborative and student-centered pedagogies which recognize diverse identities, promote meaningful engagement, and ultimately call for educational reforms

grounded in inclusion, co-agency, and care. Together, these chapters challenge the structural and ideological limitations of current academic models and offer bold, imaginative alternatives that rehumanize education and restore its ethical, ecological, and political dimensions.

Chapters 10 and 11 synthesize earlier insights and offer two imaginative frameworks for rethinking higher education. Chapter 10 introduces diffractive enquiry, a posthuman, relational pedagogy that challenges neoliberal ideals of efficiency, individualism, and linear progress, especially in the wake of COVID-19's disruption of academic time and space. Emphasizing the entanglement of space, time, and materiality ('spacetimematter'), it promotes affective, interdisciplinary learning through activities like mapping and storytelling, allowing students to examine power structures and envision more ethical, inclusive futures. Notably, this approach is particularly relevant in today's increasingly hybrid and uncertain educational environments, where overlapping crises shape students' lived experiences and require more responsive, meaningful forms of engagement. By integrating art, narrative, and theory, diffractive enquiry invites a more holistic and humanizing mode of learning that resonates with the needs of a generation seeking purpose and connection in their education. Chapter 11 builds on the idea of the 'ecological university', positioning teaching as a transformative force within the institutional ecosystem. It outlines five strategies for systemic change—such as narrative ecologies, post-abyssal thinking, and sustainable pedagogies—and critiques standardized teacher development in favor of relational, context-driven approaches. Obviously, this vision aligns powerfully with current global calls for sustainability and interdisciplinary problem-solving.

This book is both diagnostic and visionary. It not only reveals the challenges of contemporary university teaching but also proposes possible solutions and approaches. Based on the current situation, the book provides a generative roadmap for rethinking that teaching is not merely about content delivery but a critical social practice for shaping the future. In this sense' the book serves as both a mirror, reflecting the complexities and contradictions of the present, and a compass, guiding educators, administrators, and scholars who strive to teach with integrity, care, and purpose in an era marked by uncertainty and change. However, several points deserve further elaboration. Although the criticism of neoliberalism is sharp and the alternative pedagogical visions are radical, the book lacks sufficient detailed information about how these approaches can be effectively implemented within rigid and audit-driven institutions. For example, concepts such as 'diffractive enquiry' and 'ecological university' are rich in meaning and promise, but their application in the everyday teaching context remains unexplored. Providing more concrete strategies or illustrative case studies would enhance the book's utility for educators seeking actionable change.

In conclusion, this book offers valuable enlightenment and inspiration for reimaging university teaching in the post-neoliberal era. By reimaging teaching as a generative, embodied, and ecologically harmonious act, the book shows what teaching and maintaining hope mean in an era full of challenges and uncertainties. This book can serve not only as a critical reflection on current challenges but also as a lasting companion for educators committed to re-enchanting higher education.

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