



## Chinese Language Acquisition and Cross-cultural Adaptation of Irish university Students Studying Mandarin in China

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### Abstract

*This paper reports a qualitative research study of Irish university students studying Mandarin in China, investigating the facilitators of and hindrances to the students' language acquisition and cross-cultural adaptation. The research explored the lived experiences of 20 Irish university students, who were on a one-year study-abroad Chinese language learning program. The aim of the research is to understand the difficulties that the Irish university students encountered and the strategies they used in the Chinese language learning and cross-cultural process. Qualitative data was collected from face-to-face interviews and journals written by the students. Students' journals provided insight into students' language learning beliefs. Findings from this research suggest that Chinese language learning and cross-cultural adaptation is a multifaceted process enlightened by complex, interconnected factors, enhancing our understanding of how to better prepare students studying-abroad.*

### 1. Study-abroad and second language acquisition

Study abroad has been credited as a major source of foreign language competence for language learners and plays an important role in the foreign language curriculum. To understand individual variation in language gains during study abroad, a number of factors have been taken into consideration: individual differences (e.g., cognitive abilities, motivation, learning strategies); initial proficiency; living situation; quantity and quality of social interaction; and length of stay abroad (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsburg, 1995; Dufon & Churchill, 2006; Magnan & Back, 2007; Rees & Klapper, 2007; Shively, 2013). Research on language learning in study abroad has endeavored to empirically investigate if study abroad students increase their foreign language proficiency (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and communicative competence (grammatical, strategic, sociolinguistic) as the result of study abroad. Both large- and small-scale studies have reported gains in language proficiency after sojourners spend time abroad (Allen & Herron, 2003; Dewey, 2004; Kinginger, 2009; Milton & Meara, 1995).

### 2. Cross-cultural adaptation

Existing research on cross-cultural adaptation focuses mainly on culture shock (Adler, 1987; Oberg, 1960) and cultural distance (Mumford & Babiker, 1997; Redmond, 2000). Furnham and Bochner (1986) reported that international students in the UK, who came from culturally similar regions, experienced fewer social difficulties than students from culturally distant regions. Berry (2008) listed four strategies for acculturation: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) advise sojourners to adopt integration strategies.

### 3. Research questions

Dublin Institute of Technology has established a Chinese degree course combined with International Business studies since 2006. In the third year of this degree course, students go to either Beijing or Taiwan to study Mandarin. To date, there has been no empirical study carried out in Ireland which investigates Irish university students' cross-cultural adaptation in China. Attempting to address the relative lack of research on Irish students in China, the present research focuses on finding out the facilitators of and hindrances to the students' language acquisition and cross-cultural adaptation.

### 4. Research Method

A qualitative research framework is employed for this research to find the answers to the questions of this study. In-depth interviews will constitute the body of material to analyse. Furthermore, journals written by the students during their studies in China were also used for analysis.

### 5. Participants

Twenty adult participants studying Chinese at a university in Ireland. Each student had studied Chinese for two years on average, where the majority had never been to China before the study-abroad program.

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## 6. Research findings

This paper has reported an exploratory study of Chinese language acquisition and cross-cultural adaptation of a one-year study-abroad program for 20 Irish learners of Chinese. The results can be summarized as follows: sojourners benefit considerably in the learning of the Chinese language, particularly regarding oral skills, vocabulary, and sociolinguistic awareness. The majority of whom demonstrated a significant increase in Chinese language proficiency, as proved by the results of their HSK (Chinese Language Proficiency) Exam. This study identified facilitators of and barriers to the language learning and cross-cultural adaptation. First, six facilitators were selected: motivation; prior cross-cultural experiences; preparations; perceived support; integrative attitude; and psychological factors. Two hindrances were also identified: cultural distance; and bureaucracy. The data analysis also suggests that Chinese language proficiency; and use of modern technology can be both facilitators of and barriers to language acquisition and cross-cultural adaptation. These facilitating and hindering factors were deemed significant based on the frequency of reference to them and on the importance which the students attributed to them during the interviews. Table 6.1 lists the emergent themes from the data analysis, grouped according to facilitators of and hindrances to language acquisition and cross-cultural adaptation. The following strategies can be proposed to improve the language learning and cross-cultural adaptation of sojourners: (1) prior to going abroad, students should try to obtain as much information as possible about their chosen country; (2) since culture is so important, it is vital to assist the individual in understanding the new culture as much as possible especially since Eastern cultures can be very different from Western cultures. A solid study of the new culture can be the basis for successful integration; (3) sojourners are advised to actively immerse themselves in the target culture. Students in the current study who did not immerse themselves to the same degree as others in the target culture were less successful in adapting to Chinese culture and gaining proficiency in the Chinese language.

**Table 6.1 Facilitators of and Hindrances to Language Acquisition and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Identified in the Current Study**

<b>Facilitators</b>	<b>Hindrances</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Motivation</b></li> <li>• <b>Prior cross-cultural experience</b></li> <li>• <b>Preparation</b></li> <li>• <b>Perceived support</b></li> <li>• <b>Integrative attitude</b></li> <li>• <b>Intercultural personality characteristics: openness; self-esteem and self-efficacy</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Culture distance</b></li> <li>• <b>Bureaucracy</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Facilitators / Hindrances</b>  <b>Chinese language proficiency and use of modern technology can be both facilitators of and hindrances to cross-cultural adaptation and language acquisition</b></p>	

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