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Cultural adaptation challenges and strategies during study abroad: New Zealand students in China[*]

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ABSTRACT

The rising popularity of the Chinese language as a subject for study has motivated research on international students' cultural adaptation and language learning during periods of study abroad in China. This inquiry examined the challenges that a group of New Zealand students encountered and the strategic responses they adopted in relation to cultural adaptation in China. In the inquiry, we encouraged 15 participants to write reflective journals and conducted group interviews to explore their experiences. The analysis revealed the variety of challenges that the participants faced, including language-based, lifestyle, and academic challenges as well as sociocultural and psychological ones. In response to these challenges, the participants adopted diverse strategic efforts to achieve cognitive, affective, and skill development in facilitating their communication practices with local Chinese people. These findings suggest that language educators need to revise traditional pedagogical approaches so that new pedagogical activities can be developed to promote study abroad students' communication competence, and counselling services should be provided to support their cultural adaptation and language learning.

1. Introduction

Study abroad is a short and usually temporary sojourn in a foreign country/region where students have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the target culture and to use the target language (Larrinaga & Amurrio, 2015; Moore, 2016). Due to the status of English as the lingua franca, much research on study abroad has focused on international students' learning experiences in countries where English is one of the official languages, predominantly the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia (Isabelli-García et al., 2018; Li & Zhu, 2013). Other studies have also explored the study abroad experiences of students from English-speaking countries when learning languages such as French (e.g. Wilkinson, 2002), German (e.g. Schenker, 2018), Russian (e.g. Davidson, 2010), or Spanish (e.g. Shively, 2015) abroad. Most of these studies have investigated the impact of study

abroad on language development (Briggs, 2016). Studies have also examined learner identity and agency (e.g. Kinginger, 2013), learner perspectives on language learning (e.g. Allen, 2010), and learner strategy use (e.g. Gao, 2010), generating insights for language educators to facilitate study abroad learners' language learning. However, few studies in the field of language learning have explored study abroad students learning non-European languages in non-English-speaking countries. Existing studies have mainly examined cultural adaptation among international students in English-speaking contexts, but international students in China remain an under-examined population (Ma & Zhao, 2018; Gong, Lai, et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2017). In particular, little attention has been paid to international students' cultural adaptation in the higher education context in China, which has different cultural, political, and social conditions from those in international students' home contexts (Tian & Lu, 2018).

In the last decade, the Chinese language has been increasingly taught and learnt as a second or foreign language both in and outside China (Moloney & Xu, 2015; Gong, Gao, et al., 2020; Gong, Lyu, et al., 2018). In 2018, 492,185 foreign students from 196 countries/regions were attending Chinese universities and almost half of them were learning Chinese as a foreign language (Ministry of Education, April 04, 2019). Specifically, because China is playing an increasingly significant role in global economics, politics, and culture, more and more New Zealand students are keen to enhance their Chinese language ability in order to pursue future opportunities. According to the Ministry of Education of New Zealand, in 2019 the overall enrolment of students learning Chinese exceeded 70,000, an increase of almost 90% over the 2015 figure (Xinhuanet, November 22, 2019). At the same time, Chinese immersion programmes have thrived in China over the past decade. When entering tertiary educational institutions in China, New Zealand students may encounter challenges stemming from the communication, education, and socialisation they have experienced in their home-culture learning context (Holmes, 2005). This study attempts to examine the cultural adaptation challenges experienced by New Zealand students during study abroad in China.

2. Cultural adaptation challenges and international students' strategic responses

International students are likely to experience difficulties when adapting themselves to their new context. According to Kim (2001), cultural adaptation refers to a 'dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments' (p. 31).

As this process generally involves 'various forms of mutual accommodation' (Berry, 2005, p. 699), both individual-level (psychological adaptation) and group-level (sociocultural adaptation) changes often occur during contact between sojourners and hosts. In this regard, it is reasonable to expect that international students may encounter a variety of life changes as a result of encountering a new culture. Holmes (2005) demonstrated a range of differences between Chinese and New Zealand students regarding interpersonal communication and classroom interaction styles in the higher education environment. For example, in terms of interpersonal communication patterns, while Chinese students tend to maintain harmony in relationships by being indirect or avoiding

disagreement during conversation, New Zealand students prefer directness and explicitness in interaction, expressing information through verbal messages and seeking to clarify any vagueness or ambiguity in conversations. With regard to communication in the classroom, New Zealand teachers generally engage with students in a dialogic learning mode and encourage them to express views and ask questions. In contrast, Chinese students and teachers share features of their own dialectic educational setting, where the teacher is typically seen as a model and authority, and communication between students and teachers is not always regarded as a part of the learning process (Heng, 2018; Holmes, 2006).

Although previous studies may be at risk of stereotyping (Heng, 2018; Kumaravadivelu, 2003), the aforementioned differences highlight cultural adaptation as a significant issue deserving further attention. In practice, international students encounter and need to respond challenges, stressors, or difficulties caused by cultural differences during study abroad programmes (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Smith and Khawaja (2011) identified five major categories of possible stressors that pertained specifically to international students' cultural adaptation in Western universities: language-based, academic, sociocultural, discriminatory, and practical or lifestyle acculturative stressors. By analysing data from focus group interviews conducted with mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, Yu and Zhang (2016) found that the mainland Chinese students experienced four kinds of adaptation challenges, including language barriers, social interactions, political identification, and discrimination. Although some work has been carried out on cultural adaptation challenges, results concerning this issue mainly relate to international students studying in contexts where English is used as an official language. Findings among different cultural groups from other language contexts, like study abroad students in China, may be different and deserve separate attention.

International students in China experience a range of difficulties concerning national, regional, and social diversity (Dervin, 2011; Jin & Dervin, 2017), just like their counterparts in other contexts. As an example, using a Study Abroad Stress Survey, Hashim and Yang (2003) found that academic and interpersonal sources of stress were the most common and intrapersonal and environmental sources of stress were the least frequently reported by African and Western students in Chinese universities. Akhtar et al. (2015) reported that African students in Chinese universities often encountered issues pertaining to environmental, sociocultural, psychological, and academic adaptation. Even though these studies have identified various challenges/factors that international students experience in China from a macro-level analysis (using quantitative data), they have not addressed social, cultural, linguistic, and programme-level complexities related to cultural adaptation. For instance, adaptation challenges may emerge in specific circumstances and interact with individual differences such as personal development, motivation, and learning backgrounds. In addition, research on international students in China pays little attention to the strategies they use when reacting to different challenges, like most of the previous studies conducted in English-speaking settings.

Informed by the 'social turn' in second/foreign language acquisition research (Block, 2003), Ortega (2011) contends that 'language learning encompasses not only grammars and discourses but also social practices, values and indexicality' (p. 172). In response to cultural adaptation challenges, study abroad students need to develop communication competence with the hosts, which is defined as the overall internal capacity to decode

and encode information in accordance with the communication practices of the host culture (Kim, 2017; Lee & Chen, 2000). Communication competence comprises cognitive, affective, and skill development, and can only be achieved through 'communicating in accordance with the host cultural norms and practices and participating in host social communication process' (Kim, 2017, p. 6). Cognitive development refers to sojourners' efforts to acquire knowledge of the host language, culture, values, norms, and rules of social conduct and interpersonal relationships. Affective development relates to sojourners' resonating emotionally and motivationally with the hosts. Cognitive and affective development works side by side with skill development, with the sojourners learning to express themselves using appropriate combinations of verbal and nonverbal acts in specific communicative settings in the host society.

This conceptualisation of communication competence will help us to understand study abroad students' experiences of cultural adaptation in the context of mainland China. The present study attempts to explore how New Zealand students strategically respond to challenges related to cultural adaptation in China by addressing the following two questions:

RQ1: What challenges do New Zealand students experience upon arrival and during academic studies in China?

RQ2: What strategic responses do they adopt in response to these challenges?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context and participants

The study elicited and interpreted experiential accounts from a cohort of New Zealand students who were learning Chinese as a foreign language during study abroad in China. Details of the participants can be found in Table 1. This programme offered both face-to-face and online distance courses at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels, with students on both types of course using the same learning materials and studying at the same pace. To enhance New Zealanders' international skills and cultural

Table 1. Participants' profiles.

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Language level	Study mode	Major
1	Carol	18	Female	Beginner	Internal class	Arts
2	Laura	22	Female	Intermediate	Distance class	Arts
3	Robert	44	Male	Advanced	Distance class	Arts
4	Sandra	19	Female	Lower intermediate	N/A	Design
5	Deborah	23	Female	Intermediate	Distance class	Chinese and Japanese
6	Allen	54	Male	Intermediate	Distance class	Arts
7	Steven	28	Male	Beginner	Internal class	Arts
8	Thomas	29	Male	Intermediate	Distance class	Arts
9	Lisa	44	Female	Intermediate	Distance class	Arts
10	Jason	31	Male	Intermediate	Internal class	Business
11	Richard	51	Male	Beginner	Distance class	Arts
12	Helen	24	Female	Beginner	Distance class	Arts
13	Donald	20	Male	Beginner	Internal class	Information science
14	Mark	45	Male	Advanced	Distance class	Chinese
15	Susan	59	Female	Lower intermediate	Internal class	Linguistics

Note: all names are pseudonyms.

understanding, in 2013 the New Zealand government initiated the Prime Minister's Scholarship for Asia (PMSA), awarded to individuals studying or researching in Asia. With the aim of improving their Chinese proficiency and learning about Chinese culture, these students obtained PMSA support and voluntarily took part in a study abroad programme in a university in Beijing, China, which lasted six weeks. The programme concentrated on developing the students' listening and reading comprehension skills, which were taught by native Chinese teachers with Chinese as the medium of instruction. The only criteria for recruiting participants to the study were that they were native English speakers studying Chinese, and that they share their experience including challenges and difficulties during their cultural adaptation in China. Invitations were sent to 20 students via email, and 15 of them agreed to participate voluntarily in this research. Consent was obtained prior to the reflection journals and interviews being conducted.

Although they had limited exposure to Chinese culture prior to their arrival, these participants may have had some preconceived ideas about Chinese society, such as mainstream culture, daily living, and the educational system. Most of them had commonly-held stereotypes about Chinese people and culture. For instance, from their self-reports we noted that many of them began with deeply entrenched perceptions that Chinese people are always quiet, and that Chinese food means sweet and sour pork. As can be seen in Table 1, the participants were heterogeneous in terms of their personal background demographics, such as their age, Chinese language level, and major.

3.2 Data collection

To address the research questions and enhance the quality of the qualitative research, we collected data by encouraging the participants to write reflective journals and conducting group interviews with them. A reflective journal is both a product and a process, which helps researchers 'capture an experience, record an event, explore our feeling, or make sense of what we know' (Boud, 2001, p. 9). Specifically, it encourages research participants to elaborate and document their individual experiences and feelings (Dunlap, 2005), to identify and analyze their difficulties and challenges (Clarke et al., 1993), to reflect on and articulate their thinking and problem-solving strategies (Fogarty & McTighe, 1993), and to make their conceptual and perceptual changes visible (Dunlap, 2005). These advantages are in line with the two research questions in the present study. To capture the intercultural challenges that the New Zealand students faced and the strategies they adopted to react to these challenges in their six-week study abroad programme, three questions/prompts were used to guide their reflections: (1) What are your observations about the society and culture in China? (2) What are your communication and learning experiences in China? (3) What have you done when facing difficulties in China? The reflective journals were collected each week. These weekly journals contained 86 entries in total, each of which was about one single-spaced typewritten-page in length. All the entries were identified with a code; for instance, 'Donald/R/W3' meant the entry was Donald's reflection entry from the third week.

Group interviewing 'involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion' (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177). It was used because the naturalistic conversational situation it creates helps to obtain authentic and rich data (Abednia et al., 2013), and its focus on 'ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues' (Rabiee,

2004, p. 656) was in accord with the nature of this research. The group interviews in the present study were framed around several general topics that allowed room for the participants to talk freely about their own experiences of and viewpoints on acculturation and cultural adaptation, which enabled the interviewer to delve deeper into each participant's accounts. During the interviews, the following topics were addressed: (1) communication and learning experiences, (2) perceptions about Chinese society and culture, (3) dilemmas in daily living and learning, (4) strategies for or approaches to coping with dilemmas, and (5) achievement in the study abroad programme. Group interviews were conducted with five participants each time in their native language, English, so that they could express themselves more freely. Each interview lasted around 90 min. Interview topics/questions were first reviewed and assessed by one expert and one researcher interested in acculturation and cultural adaptation. Then, the topics/questions and the technique were pilot tested with three native-English-speaker students learning Chinese in a university in China. Interpretations for each item were checked, suggestions for wording were elicited, and the interview questions were revised accordingly. All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim into English, and double-checked for accuracy.

3.3 Data analysis

The data collected through reflective journaling and group interviewing were hand-coded and a thematic analysis was carried out. The data were analysed through a cyclical and evolving process of coding and recoding, and the themes were derived inductively from the data (Saldaña, 2015). The first cycle of analysis comprised attribute coding and structural coding. The research questions and the literature on challenges in cultural adaptation and the strategies used to cope with these challenges informed the structural coding, which split the data into small data segments of different organisational categories (e.g. lifestyle challenges, language-based challenges, learning about and understanding Chinese culture, etc.). Journal entries and interview transcriptions were read through four times, and bits of data that were relevant and important to the theme, or which struck the researchers as interesting, were first coded using the interviewees' original words. A second cycle of analysis was then conducted to assess the utility of the codes from the first cycle of coding, and to recode, categorise, or discard codes accordingly. Similar codes were aggregated into analytic categories. The initial coding of the analytic categories was then compared across the participants to find repeating ideas and supporting evidence to cross-validate the categories that emerged. Annotations and memos were used during the data analysis to record immediate comments and reflexive thinking on the data. The annotations and memos as well as interview field notes were adopted to facilitate data coding and categorisation (Maxwell, 2005).

   We were aware that the researchers' own beliefs and views may interfere with the 'objectivity, reflexivity and authenticity of a research project' (Kanuha, 2000, p. 444), and therefore we conducted participant checking after the data collection and the write-up to enhance the rigour of the research and the credibility of the research findings (Thomas, 2017). In order to ensure the accuracy of the data and the trustworthiness of the subsequent analysis, all journal entries and interview transcriptions were sent back to the participants to see if there was anything they would like to correct, clarify, or

add to inform the analysis and to help us develop new ideas and interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). Three participants made minor annotations, and the other twelve participants returned the documents without additional comment.

4. Results

The analysis of the data identified that New Zealand students experienced various cultural adaptation challenges during their study abroad in China. The challenges not only refer to a range of problems occurring inside the individual learner (psychological), but also relate to different levels of environment (classroom, university, and host society). The analysis revealed that cultural adaptation is 'the entirety of dynamic process by which individuals … strive to establish (or reestablish) and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment' (Kim, 2001, p. 31). The experiential accounts also demonstrate that most of the participants adopted different strategic responses to different challenges in order to integrate.

4.1 Challenges in relation to cultural adaptation

Overall, the participants reported five categories of challenges encountered during their study abroad: psychological, academic, lifestyle, socialisation, and language-based. As can be seen in Table 2, the participants reported language-based, lifestyle, and academic

Table 2. Five categories of challenges and relevant strategic responses.

Category of the challenge	Frequency & percentage	Strategic responses
Language-based (11/15) Linguistic barriers that affect international students' daily communication with Chinese locals	25 (30.9%)	(1) Seeking practice opportunities with locals to improve oral Chinese used in daily scenarios (8/15) (2) Learning vocabulary specifically used in daily settings (7/15) (3) Enhancing Chinese proficiency with teachers' assistance inside the classroom (1/15)
Academic (13/15) Difficulties adapting to the Chinese educational system, such as Chinese teachers' instructional style, language comprehension barrier concerning the medium of instruction, class workload, and Chinese character learning	20 (24.7%)	(1) No clear strategy to adapt to Chinese medium (5/15) (2) Negative strategic response to teacher-centered teaching style (3/15) (3) Direct strategy (memory) for various learning tasks and Chinese character learning (5/15)
Lifestyle (12/15) Practical or lifestyle difficulties on and off campus	21 (25.9%)	Resonating emotionally with Chinese locals (7/15)
Socialisation (8/15) Difficulties adjusting to Chinese communication style and cultural norms	8 (9.9%)	(1) Connecting with Chinese culture (4/15) (2) Avoiding doing something culturally offensive/inappropriate or accepting Chinese social etiquette (2/15) (3) Establishing local friendships (3/15)
Psychological (5/15) Difficulties or obstacles that affected study abroad students' mental status	7 (8.6%)	Appreciating and participating in local people's emotional sensibility (4/15)

challenges much more frequently than socialisation and psychological ones. These challenges will be elaborated using the participants' own accounts in the following sections.

4.1.1 Language-based challenges

The most significant challenge that the participants experienced was unsurprisingly related to language. Language-based challenges were linguistic barriers, and they arose throughout the interaction between individual learners and Chinese locals, especially in daily communication. 'Building a level of proficiency in the host culture' is essential for sojourner students' daily functioning (Kim, 2017, p. 2). Most of the participants (11/15) reported language-related challenges and frequently used words like 'challenge', 'struggle', and 'problem' to describe their linguistic adaptation in China. As recounted by them, the language-related challenges generated barriers on a daily basis in diverse settings, such as restaurants, stores, the library, and calling taxis. Steven was a beginner learner of Chinese, and he had difficulties in understanding Chinese locals on campus.

[1]

The big challenge seems to be that you may be good enough to make yourself understood but not necessarily to understand the response to your inquiries. (Steven/R/W6)

As Putonghua is taught as a standard linguistic system to speakers of other languages in and outside China, the participants generally had little knowledge of other varieties of Chinese (seven main groups of dialects: Mandarin, Wu, Min, Xiang, Gan, Hakka, and Cantonese) (Huang & Liao, 2002). This enhanced their difficulty in communicating with Chinese locals with different dialectal backgrounds. Because of his limited Chinese proficiency, Thomas expressed: 'Going off campus has many challenges and requires quite a bit more planning in China because of the language (Chinese)' (Thomas/R/W4). In practice, the language adaptation issue was closely connected with the other challenges and usually decreased the participants' willingness to interact with locals, impeding their integration into the local society.

4.1.2 Academic challenges

Academic challenges occurred when the participants needed to adjust to a new educational system in China, such as the Chinese teaching style. These problems typically occurred when sojourner students entered into a new education environment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The analysis indicated that almost every participating student (13/15) experienced these challenges during study abroad. Lisa was a high school Japanese teacher in New Zealand and had achieved intermediate Chinese proficiency. She also operated a farm tourism business and had a strong motivation to use Chinese to communicate with tourists from China. Despite her rich teaching and intercultural experience, she found it extremely hard to adapt to her Chinese teachers' instructional style.

[2]

The teacher basically spoke solidly everyday like a machine gun and without any visual guides, I found I was really struggling to understand. (Lisa/R/W3)

Although Lisa had learned Chinese for two years, she realised she 'was floundering some-what in the class'. Likewise, Mark also felt 'very annoyed' at this teaching style (Mark/R/W3), even though he was the only participant who was majoring in Chinese in this pro-gramme. According to the participants' accounts, the Chinese teachers' teaching style seemed to be the most challenging aspect for them (4/15). Grounded in Confucian prin-ciples, the Chinese educational system generally places value on the authority of the teacher, and this typically results in teacher-centered classrooms (Moloney, 2013). In con-trast, the constructivist-based educational schema more common on Western classrooms mostly posits that '[o]nly learners themselves can be the active participants in the learning process' (Simons, 1993, pp. 294–295). Thus, the participants, who were used to construc-tivist teaching, felt stressed when adapting to a pedagogical approach that was very different from the communicative approach they were used to. They often reacted nega-tively to this teaching style. As a representative case, Mark 'was never going to repeat her (the teacher's) sentences' (Mark/R/W3) when he was pushed to do this. Even though he knew that teacher modelling was a useful tool in language classrooms, he still tended to resist the teaching and communication patterns used by his teacher.

Another academic challenge a few participants (5/15) encountered was the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction. Carol was a beginner Chinese language learner. She had an e-commerce business and cooperated with Chinese machine producers. In the Chinese-only classroom, she was 'disgruntled' as she did not understand 'some of what the teacher was saying', but she felt comforted when she 'found out that I wasn't the only one who had little idea as to what was going on' (Carol/R/W3). Most of the participants reported 'putting in more effort' as the only strategic response to this problem, even though they could not provide any detail in their accounts about what this effort might entail.

A few participants (5/15) faced academic challenges regarding course level, tasks in and outside the classroom, and Chinese character learning. For instance, the course work-load was usually beyond their former learning pace in New Zealand. Apart from the chal-lenge of intensive learning, they also mentioned that homework and learning new words and grammar points caused problems for them as well.

[3]

In addition to the amount of homework resulting from our classes, the volume of new words and grammar points being learned at once is a lot larger than what we are all used to. (Laura/R/W3)

In fact, the academic challenges regarding teacher-centered style, Chinese as the sole instruction medium, and unrealistic student workload underpinned a lack of interaction, participation, and collaboration between teachers and students in the classroom. This mismatch and tension between participants' previous learning experiences and the Chinese teachers' actual teaching approach not only increased the difficulty of acquiring the Chinese language, but also influenced the participants' understanding of the Chinese cultural and educational systems.

4.1.3 Lifestyle challenges
Lifestyle challenges referred to practical or lifestyle difficulties that New Zealand students encountered when living in China. Understanding of lifestyle diversity is critical in one's

cultural adaptation in a new place. The majority of the participants (12/15) reported that they encountered challenges with food and drink (8/15), public space (5/15), accommodation (4/15), climate and air quality (4/15), payment mode (2/15), and Chinese character context (2/15). The food and drink on the university campus was different from the participants' usual dietary habits, which troubled many of them. Carol 'was struggling when it came to time for meals' in her first couple of days in China, and found she had 'begun to miss the simple things like cereal for breakfast (in New Zealand)' (Carol/R/W2). According to Gulick (1971), diet was one of the most conservative and least acculturated aspects of life.

A few participants reported that they needed to adapt to the cashless society and to accept mobile payment. Even though Allen was a CEO of a small multinational company doing business with Chinese partners and frequently went to China, he found 'it difficult to complete basic transactions without WeChat Pay or AliPay' in mainland China (Allen/R/W1). Thus, it seemed that many participants in the study needed to adapt themselves to the popular payment methods in China, because their prior experience in New Zealand had a significant influence on their acceptance of mobile payment.

4.1.4 Socialisation challenges

Socialisation challenges were related to adjustment problems that New Zealand students experienced in the process of adapting to Chinese communication patterns and cultural values and norms. According to Kim (2001), cultural adaptation always links to participation in the social processes of the host society through direct and indirect contact with the local community, and establishing and maintaining a reciprocal relationship with local people. The analysis indicated that socialisation challenges normally referred to difficulties becoming accustomed to the Chinese communication style (5/15) and cultural values and norms (3/15). Carol recognised the difference in communication style between 'I'/'we' (New Zealanders) and 'Chinese people', and 'witnessed situations in which this (the difference) results in a misunderstanding and can even be hurtful' in her first week of the programme.

[4]

> I am an outspoken person and thus, the Chinese people may consider me to be very upfront and confrontational in my way of communication. While in New Zealand we are encouraged to defend our ideas which may prompt debate, I quickly noticed that in most situations, Chinese people will simply nod on your opinion even if they disagree, out of respect. Blunt communication also appears to make Chinese people feel somewhat uneasy and they much prefer more subtle, indirect ways of communicating ideas. (Carol/R/W1)

Carol perceived that people rely heavily on indirect communication to maintain harmonious relations and to prevent a loss of face on either side of the interaction in Chinese culture. In contrast, she projected herself to represent people from the New Zealand culture, who are more individualistic and assertive in getting their point across (Holmes, 2005). This assumption could become a kind of stereotype that 'might consistently influence interactions' between the participants and Chinese locals (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 71).

Cultural norms are the shared expectations and rules lived by people within social groups, and they explain and justify people's 'actions and thoughts' (Dervin, 2012,

p. 187). A few participants were shocked by some Chinese cultural norms, such as the intense competition among Chinese university students. In Jason's opinion, '[t]he students here have a mentality not just to achieve, but to excel', and '[h]ere at the University there seems to be a competitive nature of who's the top dog on campus' (Jason/R/W1). In general, Chinese people are stereotypically defined as collectivistic, but they also demonstrate a high level of vertical individualism (Chen & Li, 2005). They also have 'an orientation wanting to be better than others' (Chen et al., 2011, p. 355). According to Kramsch (1998), individual language learners usually think according to cultural patterns that are shared among the members of the diverse groups they interact with. This kind of interaction can consequently shape New Zealand students' definitions and understanding of other cultural groups as well, and their culturally-specific or culturally-general interpretations will influence the development of their personal ability in cultural adaptation (Jin & Dervin, 2017; Zhu et al., 2019).

4.1.5 Psychological challenges

In light of the above-mentioned challenges, some participants experienced psychological challenges, in the form of difficulties or obstacles that affected their mental status during their study abroad. During the initial phase of cultural adaptation, sojourners may suffer from a severe psychological dislocation and sense of loss (Chan & Lam, 1987; Kim, 2017). Our analysis suggested that psychological challenges were typically reported in relation to the participants' personal loneliness (2/15), low self-esteem (2/15), and identity tension (1/15) during their study abroad in China. Susan was in her fifties and a university staff member. She had learned the Chinese language through a distance-learning class, and she wanted to use Putonghua to communicate with Chinese students in New Zealand. Susan stated that the first week of her stay was 'probably one of the hardest' because '[m]issing some of the connection with others made me feel alone' (Susan/R/W6). The experience of loneliness is often connected with social isolation, and emotional loneliness in general interacts with social loneliness, in terms of the absence of closeness to or intimacy with friends, the absence of meaningfulness in interactions, and relatively small networks (Green et al., 2001). In her first week in the Chinese university Susan had not yet built any meaningful connections with homogenous or heterogeneous friends, and this deficiency in social relationships resulted in emotional loneliness. Given the participants' low Chinese proficiency, communication problems in specific situations (e.g. the canteen, stores) sometimes damaged their self-esteem. Sandra initially helped the cleaners in the canteen, but this was misunderstood as lagging behind in cleaning her tableware.

[5]

I usually put the chopsticks in the separate bin myself, but one time I was taking a bit too long and one of the workers just said "quickly go" to me in Chinese. I was completely taken aback and thought, WOW, I am helping her and she is so rude to me! (Sandra/R/W2)

In practice, learning a second or foreign language relates not only to its exchange value, but also to its symbolic and cultural value (Duchêne & Heller, 2012). For the New Zealand students in the study abroad context, while their linguistic deficiency hindered their daily

interaction with locals, it seemed that cultural and epistemological boundaries between themselves and native Chinese speakers were also an insurmountable barrier.

4.2 Strategic responses to cultural adaptation challenges

The participants' accounts revealed that they undertook strategic efforts in response to the cultural adaptation challenges they encountered, which helped them not only to develop linguistic ability but also to build up cultural and epistemological competence. In order to adapt to the new context they used a variety of strategic responses, using their linguistic and social resources to improve their communication competence with the hosts. However, it also should be noted that when confronting challenges regarding the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction, some participants (e.g. Lisa, Mark) apparently reported no clear strategy to tackle them.

4.2.1 Strategic responses for cognitive development

The analysis indicated that the frequent language barriers they encountered in daily communication stimulated the participants to improve their Chinese language knowledge quickly. They used different strategic responses to strengthen their vocabulary foundation. Some participants who had low Chinese proficiency (e.g. Jason, Donald) sought out practice opportunities with locals to promote their oral Chinese used in daily scenarios. Other participants (e.g. Deborah, Robert, Susan), who had richer Chinese learning experience, worked hard to learn vocabulary specifically used in daily settings. Mark, the only student with a Bachelor's degree in Chinese, made efforts to enhance his Chinese proficiency with the teachers' assistance in the classroom. These diverse forms of linguistic competence enhancement occurred alongside the study abroad programme, which provided limited resources for the participants to develop their daily communication ability. The absence of relevant support offered freedom for individuals to adopt individualised strategies.

Learning words and vocabulary used outside classroom settings was a common strategic response by a number of participants (6/15). Deborah had a double major in Chinese and Japanese. Although she had a strong interest in learning languages, the 'awkwardness of starting a conversation with a Chinese stranger and inadequate Chinese communication skills' often held her back from interacting with Chinese people. After an unsuccessful communication experience with library staff, Deborah realised the importance of acquiring vocabulary for use in everyday scenarios. In the interview, she stated, 'I won't get anywhere unless I also work on learning new vocabulary'. According to Deborah, building lists of vocabulary was a precondition for effective interactions with native Chinese speakers. Robert, an advanced Chinese language learner, also perceived that learning daily words was a practical response to everyday interaction challenges in China, such as ordering food (Robert/R/W2).

Unlike the other learners, Mark, the only one who had majored in Chinese, demonstrated remarkable confidence in his daily communication. He felt it was a better way to 'study with more teachers who have vast experience plus going outside in the world and getting instant reinforcement' (Mark/R/W1). In other words, Mark would rather develop more social resources to enhance his linguistic knowledge.

In order to adjust to academic challenges and improve their Chinese language knowledge, a few participants (e.g. Allen, Laura, Robert, Sandra) attempted to use a direct learning strategy (memory) to promote their learning efficiency, as they realised that 'the most effective way is still repetition, writing and try to remember it' (Allen/R/W3).

When confronting socialisation challenges, some participants (3/15) tended to enhance their knowledge of Chinese culture and the rules of interpersonal conduct through learning about Chinese people and culture. For instance, Allen attended a course on Chinese dining etiquette because he had heard that most business deals are done at the dining table in China. Helen began to 'identify at least five norms and rituals each week' to understand Chinese culture (Helen/R/W1). In their opinions, being acquainted with native speakers and national culture is strongly linked to establishing meaningful connections and building acceptable identities, like becoming a part of the host community.

4.2.2 Strategic responses for affective development

Most of the participants facing psychological challenges reported that they reacted to the challenges by appreciating local people's emotions and participating in social media exchanges with them. Jason changed his social media username (WeChat) from his English name to a Chinese name, and thought that 'a Chinese name is just as important as the Chinese culture' (Jason/R/W3). Similarly, Sandra came to understand why the cleaner was 'rude' to her in extract [5]:

[6]

The Chinese work extremely hard in what they do. They are dedicated and have a very strong work ethic. I can see it everywhere I go, outside the campus, just on the street, people always seem to be rushing somewhere, all looking like they're on a mission. It's always go go go. (Sandra/R/W2)

Through 'empathetic understanding' (Ortega, 2011) of things that were not originally acceptable, Jason and Sandra legitimised the difference from an intercultural perspective and hence alleviated their emotional disturbance.

Likewise, participants encountering lifestyle challenges also resonated emotionally with Chinese locals. When looking back the whole study abroad programme, Carol reflected that:

[7]

This experience in its entirety (the lifestyle difficulties navigating) has allowed me to gain a cognizance and appreciation for Chinese culture. (Carol/R/W6)

After adapting to the living environment in China, Carol became more familiar with and motivated to appreciate Chinese culture. Through lifestyle engagement, almost all of the participants demonstrated that 'each adaptive challenge opens an opportunity to learn and grow beyond the perimeters of the original culture' (Kim, 2017, p. 2). In the end, the experience constructed a meaningful emotional connection with the host society.

When facing socialization challenges, most of the participants attempted to make sense of uncertain circumstances by enhancing their empathetic understanding

through strategic responses such as self-awareness adjustment, avoiding cultural conflicts, or making friends with locals. For instance, in a restaurant, while Richard's friends thought that the waitress laughing at his Chinese pronunciation was offensive, he preferred to consider it as an icebreaker in the interaction, and said, 'In this instance, perhaps, humor has opened up the door'. He would rather emotionally resonate with the host in this social situation.

4.2.3 Strategic responses for skill development

The analysis revealed that even though the participants paid less attention to their skill development, they tended to use social resources (locals) to become an effective communicator. Like many participants (9/15), Jason started practicing spoken Chinese by 'every second day meeting up his language buddy'. He also hoped to understand Putonghua with a Beijing accent to 'become more confident in the Beijing dialect' (Jason/R/W2). Donald was a beginner learner and even had 'a huge problem in ordering food and a beverage at the canteen'. He differentiated 'Chinese in academic learning' and put himself 'into more conversational situations to improve my spoken Chinese' (Donald/R/W6), so that he could 'gain confidence in doing more things in China' (Donald/R/W1). For Donald, speaking more Chinese in different scenarios was an outreach strategy to improve his oral Chinese.

   Though the New Zealand students' strategic responses to the same challenge took various forms, they all showed that they wanted to integrate, shaped by their prior Chinese learning experience and performance and their interaction with contextual conditions. It should be noted that these diverse forms of Chinese language learning occurred during a study abroad programme that provided limited resources for the students to develop their daily communication ability. However, the absence of relevant support offered freedom for individuals to adopt individualised strategies.

5. Discussion

The study examined the challenges that a group of New Zealand students experienced and the strategic responses they adopted in relation to cultural adaptation during study abroad in China. Overall, the analysis has found diverse cultural adaption challenges, which can be categorised into language-based, academic, lifestyle, socialisation, and psychological ones. This result concurred with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yu & Zhang, 2016). However, rather than simply listing a range of influencing factors, we went further to identify that the participants responded to the cultural adaptation challenges with different strategic efforts to achieve cognitive development (e.g. developing linguistic and cultural knowledge), affective development in the form of empathetic understanding and dialogic engagement, and skill development through exploring diversity and interacting with locals. The findings emerging from the analysis revealed that the interaction between the students' individual prior experience and the linguistic, sociocultural, and pedagogical complexities in the host society mediated the development of their communication competence (see Figure 1). As can be seen in Figure 1, the participants' cultural adaptation went hand in hand with their language learning, and the language learning process was closely connected
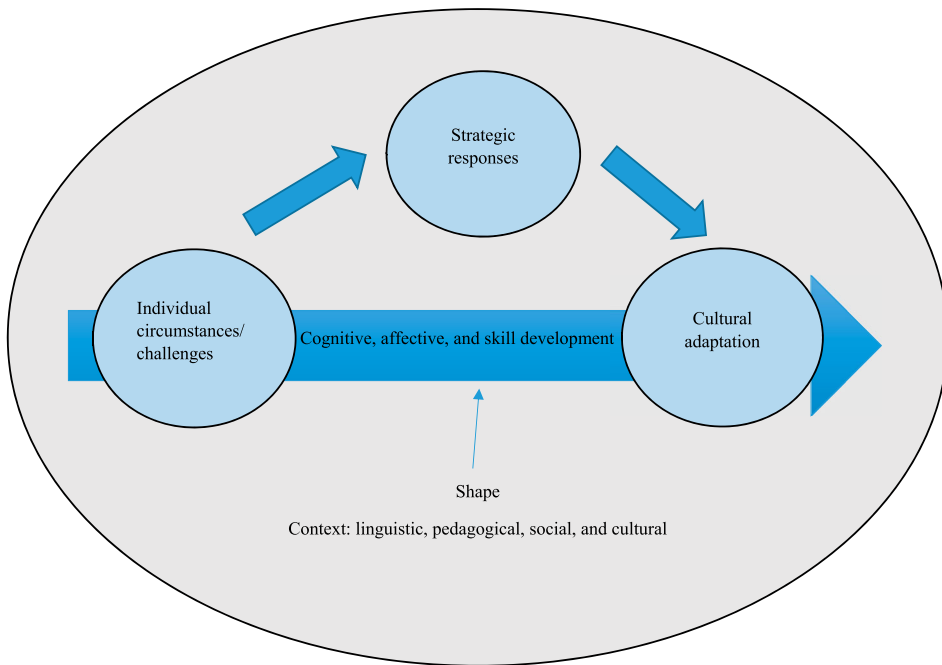
Figure 1. Challenges and strategic responses in relation to cultural adaptation.

with the development of 'understanding and responsiveness of learners' in the cultural community (Jin & Dervin, 2017, p. 11).

Adding to what has been found in previous studies on international students (e.g. Hashim & Yang, 2003), the present research identified that the participants faced many more language-based, academic, and lifestyle challenges than psychological and socialisation ones. Language-based challenges have been frequently reported by prior studies on international students' study abroad in foreign countries/regions (e.g. Yu, 2013). This study also found that cultural adaption is always closely and reciprocally interwoven with linguistic adaptation. The participants felt that the Chinese language courses they had followed in New Zealand had not fully prepared them for the challenges of everyday communication or academic study in China. Thus, it is necessary for researchers and teachers to explore a more bespoke approach to language preparation for study abroad students.

In terms of academic challenges, this study not only revealed the participants' difficulties with the Chinese workload in and outside the classroom, as also reported by previous research (e.g. Hashim & Yang, 2003), but further suggested that it was difficult for them to adapt to and overcome the teacher-centered instruction and the medium of Chinese. The latter two factors seemed to have more impact on their learning motivation and achievement. Partially in line with the studies of Hashim and Yang (2003) and Smith and Khawaja (2011), this research has showed that most participants encountered practical or lifestyle difficulties when living in China. However, lifestyle challenges with distinct Chinese characteristics were also found, such as e-payment and Chinese character contexts. Unlike prior studies on international students' adaptation in China (e.g. Akhtar et al., 2015), this study found that some participants had difficulties in becoming accustomed

to the Chinese communication style and cultural values and norms, although the socialisation challenge was not a significant issue according to our results. Regarding psychological challenges, a few participants reported personal loneliness, low self-esteem, and identity tension during their study abroad period in China. This finding differed from the results reported in studies on international students from Asia, Africa, India, and the Middle East, which have noted discrimination as a potential acculturative challenge (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yu & Zhang, 2016). It was also different from Hashim and Yang (2003) and Tian and Lu (2018) but in accordance with Li (2015) concerning their findings on international students in China.

In addition, this research found that these New Zealand students used diverse strategies in responses to the challenges they experienced while studying abroad. Specifically, the strategic responses included: (1) learning words and vocabulary used outside classroom settings, (2) learning about Chinese people and culture, (3) direct strategy (memory) for learning Chinese characters, (4) appreciating and participating in Chinese people's emotional sensibilities, and (5) interaction and communication with Chinese locals. This finding was consistent with Tong (2014); building upon this previous research as well as the findings of this study, we suggest that more discussion is needed on study abroad students' strategic responses to cultural adaptation challenges at different periods/stages. Students who stay in the host country for different lengths of time may demonstrate different repertoires of cultural adaptation (Kim, 2017). The study also showed that a few of the students adopted negative strategic responses when experiencing conflicts with the teacher-centered instruction style, and some students reported no clear strategy for tackling the problems presented by Chinese as a medium of instruction. Strategic responses in the language classroom may not contribute to, and may even hinder, their cultural adaptation. In light of the findings that emerged from the analysis, we propose that a variety of measures be undertaken to help international students to overcome various challenges for cultural adaptation.

(1) With regard to international students' linguistic challenges, it may be impractical and ineffective for teachers to follow this rigidly in teaching Chinese as a second or foreign language though the Chinese-only principle/pedagogy has been assumed to have a positive function in enhancing target language exposure (Li, 2018; Wang, 2019a, 2019b). It is critical for language teachers to consider the role of 'translanguaging' in second/foreign language education, and for researchers to continue investigating its influence on learners' language learning (García & Li, 2014; Li, 2014).

(2) To help international students to overcome academic challenges, it is a pressing task for Chinese teachers to consider changing current pedagogical practices, which in general focus on grammar explanations and students' linguistic accuracy but neglect a sociocultural understanding of language education. Although there are some unique features of Chinese language education (e.g. rote practice, Chinese character learning), the inclusion of communicative pedagogy and intercultural pedagogy would seem to be a beneficial direction for Chinese language teaching (Moloney, 2013). At the same time, teachers should pay attention to the New Zealand students' learning culture and understand that they need time to establish roles, relationships, and trust within the pedagogical process.

(3) To help international students to overcome lifestyle challenges, it is necessary for them to be cognisant of the Chinese environment, climate, society, educational system, and mainstream culture before arriving in China (Akhtar et al., 2015). This may require orientation classes and training workshops offered by the programme sponsor in the domestic nation. Additionally, the programme organiser could provide relevant information about the host nation, such as videos and booklets, to help incoming students better adapt to their new unfamiliar milieu.

(4) To help international students to address socialisation challenges, they need to be reminded that the interpersonal communication styles they bring from their home culture may be contested in the Chinese culture (Holmes, 2005), and this may improve alongside their development in language proficiency, empathetic under- standing, and communication skills. Social isolation has been reported in prior research on international students' acculturation (Sawir et al., 2008), and thus Chinese universities need to promote positive relationships between international and Chinese students by engaging them in various activities based on language and culture. At the same time, personal connections may make language learning more desirable (Singh, 2009).

(5) As for the psychological challenges that international students are likely to experi- ence, counselling services would be a potentially useful resource, and the importance of local support from Chinese friends and teachers should receive more attention (Gong, Ma, et al., 2020; Zheng et al., forthcoming). Additionally, international students should engage themselves with Chinese culture to enhance their sense of belonging and reduce their identity tension.

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated a group of New Zealand students' challenges and strategic responses related to cultural adaptation during their study abroad in a Chinese university. Analysis of reflective journal and interview data suggested that sojourner students encountered diverse challenges and adopted different strategies to react to these chal- lenges in order to integrate. The students' cultural adaptation closely intertwined with their language learning, cultural knowledge enhancement, empathetic understanding, and communication competence development, and their responses clearly confirmed the need for further support and resources to facilitate their cultural adaptation.

It must be noted that the investigation was only conducted with New Zealand stu- dents, and any generalisation of the findings to all international students in China should be undertaken with caution. This study was based on reflective journals and inter- views. It would be helpful to carry out longitudinal studies in order to map changes in students' perceived challenges and strategic responses over time. Although the reflection entries were collected weekly and strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the research results, what was reported might be different from what was enacted in the actual context. Also, in any qualitative inquiry researchers might impose their personal beliefs about and interest in intercultural discourses (Dervin, 2011; Holliday, 2011; Gong, Hu, et al., 2018). Our position as Chinese researchers meant that to some extent our data interpretation may reflect the predispositions of a Chinese research tradition

and our understanding of Chinese culture (Kramsch & Zhang, 2018). Despite these limitations, however, we believe that the results of this research show the significance of understanding the acculturation of international newcomers in China. The present study also suggests that further studies are needed to explore their nuanced and intricate strategy use, so that we can have a fuller picture of the adaptation process of international students in China and help future cohorts to adapt to Chinese language classrooms or other new educational environments.

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