

Article

Qualitative Study of the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Macao Students in Mainland China

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Abstract: Education research is increasingly paying attention to students' cross-cultural adaption in Mainland China. As a special administrative region of China, educational systems and language of instruction of Macao are different from those of Mainland China. This study analyzes the cross-cultural adaptation of Macao students in Mainland China by using qualitative semi-structured interviews. The results show that study motivation, medium of instruction, and social integration are important factors determining how Macao students adapt to university programs. Failure to adapt to the language of instruction is the most direct, prominent, and enduring problem that Macao students encounter when studying in the Mainland. The current study's findings have practical implications for faculties who provide support and training to Macao students in Mainland China. The study discovers that strengthening the Mandarin language skills of Macao students is currently a priority.

Keywords: cross-cultural adaption; Macao student; Mainland China

1. Introduction

The continuous changes in education standards among the universities and the rapid development of economic in China Mainland (Mainland) have spurred Macao students to pursue their studies at the universities. In 2019, the number of Macao students studying at Mainland universities exceeded 6300, with more than 2500 new students. Macao students studying in the Mainland serve as cultural and social ambassadors, promoting mutual understanding, trust, and development between the Mainland and Macao. As Macao students quickly adapt to the Mainland teaching environment and succeed in their studies, they attract more Macao students, which further deepen economic, social, and cultural exchanges between the two regions.

As a special administrative region of China, Macao was successfully integrated into China over 20 years ago. However, because Macao was a Portuguese colony for more than a century, the political, economic, social, and educational systems as well as the language of instruction of Macao are different from those of the Mainland. The native language of Macao students is Cantonese; however, Mandarin is the official Mainland language. Due to its sociohistorical backgrounds, people sent both to and from the Mainland may find themselves underprepared once they cross the border and engage in environments with fundamentally different cultural values and social norms [1]. Macao students continuing their studies at Mainland universities face adapting to the language of instruction, curriculum arrangement, and forms of evaluation. Therefore, the adaptation of Macao students to higher education in the Mainland is a critical matter in advancing the practice of "One Country, Two Systems" and in promoting the integration of social and cultural activities between the two regions.

Despite considerable sociocultural distance between Macao and the Mainland, very few studies have been conducted on how sociocultural issues may influence Macao students' cross-cultural adaptation and learning performance in Mainland China. With the rapid development of Macao students in Mainland China, research needs to be done on cross-cultural adaptation issues. The research on cross-cultural adaptation has produced many quantitative results [2,3]; however, qualitative research requires further exploration [4]. This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with ten Macao students studying at Mainland universities to explore their cross-cultural adaptation and identify their difficulties.

2. Theoretic Background

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the possible acceptance degree of immigrants for a new cultural context, ranging from complete adoption to rejection of the receiving society's values [5]. Kim defines cross-cultural adaptation as "the 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 this environment" [6]. Several models have been developed to describe cross-cultural adaptation. According to Berry, the following four strategies are employed by immigrants in cross-cultural adaptation: Assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization [7].

Lysgaard's U-curve model views the entire cross-cultural transition process as a culture shock and assumes that individuals normally experience four stages of adaptation, namely honeymoon, depression, recovery, and adaptation [1]. The cognitive model proposed by Anderson emphasizes the importance of individual thought processes and perceptions in cross-cultural adaptation [8]. Kim proposes a stress-growth-adaptation model in which adaptation is viewed as a result of pressure and as an upward spiral process [6]. As a part of culture, learning is a process through which the language, norms, and values of a special culture are delivered. Learning programs developed within particular linguistic and cultural contexts may need to be modified when applying to groups with different languages and cultures [9].

Motivation is integral to many aspects of learning, particularly in cross-cultural learning, where students face more challenges when acquiring new knowledge. People might possess different types of motivation based on their cross-cultural interests. Moreover, language is an essential part of culture. It reflects how people interpret the world around them. Language is vitally linked to every aspect of culture, and culture cannot be fully understood or transmitted to new members without the help of language [10]. In cross-cultural interactions, language is the primary means for newcomers to learn the values, norms, and knowledge of a new culture.

Social networking is crucial in cross-cultural adaption, because it gives people more opportunities to deal with the challenges presented by a new culture, especially when they require emotional support and information when addressing culture shocks. Because language is the fundamental tool of communication, it plays an important role in human interaction both in the classroom and in everyday life. Language enables people to communicate and build deep relationships with their families [11]. Using a person's preferred language facilitates a deeper connection with that person, and this practice is beneficial for developing relationships, reducing cultural barriers, and increasing the likelihood of openness to the message one desires to share [12].

3. Materials and Methods

Qualitative research is helpful in providing rich case information and in-depth descriptions of social phenomena [13]. In education research, quantitative methods have been widely used and can even be considered the main approach to research in this field [14]. Qualitative research, as a post hoc explanation educational research method, is more effective for investigating the complex spiritual, social, and cultural phenomena involved in educational practice [15].

Macao students' adaptation to higher education in the Mainland is essentially a social and cultural phenomenon that occurs through the cumulative life experiences of the students. In the adaptation process, Macao students attach specific meaning to Mainland higher education based on personal experience and respond accordingly. This meaning is provided by educational subjects in the process of interaction through understanding and interpretation, and it requires methods such as qualitative research to be understood [16]. This approach provides a more profound understanding of topics that researchers are yet to fully understand [17,18]. This study, which explored the characteristics of problems related to learning adaptation, recruited junior and senior students as interviewees. Whenever students review the narrative of their experience, adopting an interpretive approach is essential to understanding the feeling of reading [19]. This study adopted a qualitative approach along with semi-structured interviews to collect and analyze data. This approach allowed researchers to understand the adaptation of Macao students [20]. Precision and rigor are the most important considerations of the study, which are defined as the ability to describe the salient characteristics. In comparison, digital measurements are not important considerations [21,22].

Macao students who have spent longer studying in the Mainland have a systematic and deep understanding of the problems encountered while studying in the Mainland. Using such students as interviewees facilitates the identification of typical and prominent adaptation-related problems. Macao students encounter and clarify the formation mechanisms of these problems. Therefore, four junior and six senior Macao students studying at the Jinan universities were recruited as interview subjects, named from A to J to ensure anonymity (Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of interviewees.

Order	Gender	Junior	Senior	Age
A	M		⊙	22
B	M		⊙	21
C	M		⊙	23
D	M		⊙	22
E	M		⊙	21
F	F	⊙		20
G	F	⊙		20
H	F		⊙	22
I	F	⊙		21
J	F	⊙		21

The study interviewed the total of ten Macao students individually, and each interview lasted 30 minutes. The semi-structured questionnaires addressed adaptation to the language environment and teaching style, continuity between the school systems in Macao and the Mainland, exchange with Mainland students, and recognition of social values in Mainland. The following table outlines a selection of the major themes that emerged from the reflection on theory and reviewed literature (Table 2). The following main questions were included in the interviews:

(1) Do you think the language of instruction constitutes an obstacle to the acceptance of classroom knowledge? What are the specific obstacles?

(2) Have you been able to adapt to the lifestyle and the beliefs in the Mainland so far? If not, what are your main concerns?

(3) Do you think there are barriers to the exchange of information inside and outside of class? What are the main obstacles?

Table 2. Selected emerging themes and concepts.

Theme	Adaptation
Listening, reading, speaking, and writing	Language
Chinese Characters	
Textbook	
Religious belief	Social life
Chinese background	
Lifestyle	
Identification	Peer relationship
Friendship	
Learning obstacle	

4. Results

A comprehensive analysis of the data obtained from the interviews revealed that the adaptation of Macao students to higher education in the Mainland involves multiple aspects. Adaptation to the language of instruction is clearly more prominent. In this study, language of instruction refers to the language used at Mainland universities to systematically teach specific professional knowledge and practical skills. Language adaptation is the main challenge faced during cross-cultural learning and has received increasing attention in recent years [23,24].

4.1. Motivation of the Study

Whether in the Mainland or in Macao, university study is not considered a part of compulsory education. Obtaining a college education, especially for Macao students who opt to leave home to study in the Mainland, is an active choice that requires courage and determination. Considering the economic and social development of the Mainland, studying in the Mainland is a positive investment in their long-term development. In a specific teaching context, the extent to which learning goals are achieved can measure the educational effect. Understanding the motivations of Macao students for pursuing higher education in the Mainland is the basis of our research and analysis of the adaptability of Macao students to the education model. Interviews revealed that the interviewees' study motivations were as follows:

“ China is developing very fast. No matter how you want to learn Mandarin, this environment is the most suitable, just like the case of people learning English abroad. After going back to Macao, I plan to pursue graduate studies. Many people wish to study administration in Macao; if you study at the University of Macao, you will have a good chance of being accepted for graduate study or becoming a government worker (Interviewee A).

I chose to go to a university in the Mainland because I wanted to go someplace on my own. Tuition also played a role: I wanted to reduce the financial burden on my family. In addition, a college diploma and experience in the Mainland provides more opportunities and better employment prospects (Interviewee J).

I have been studying in Macao for a long time. I wanted to be alone and develop independence. Tuition in Macao is a bit more expensive. When studying in Macao, you must also work to cover tuition fees (Interviewee B).

I think colleges in the Mainland offer more freedom and a better college life. If you are studying in Macao, you have to fight to maintain a work–study balance. It is difficult to learn in such a situation (Interviewee C).”

The interviewee responses indicated that Macao students' motivation for studying in the Mainland stems from three main reasons. The first relates to employment motivation. Because Mainland graduate diplomas, such as those obtained from the Jinan University, are widely recognized in Macao, they can

help Macao students secure better jobs in Macao. The second motivation relates to language learning. Students hope to develop their Mandarin abilities while studying in the Mainland; these language skills increase their employability and the likelihood of promotion. The third motivation relates to the desire for independence. Numerous Macao students hope to cultivate their independence by leaving Macao for their university education. Studying in the Mainland costs less and reduces the financial burden of higher education on students' families, making it possible for Macao students to devote more time to learning and experiencing a new culture [25]. With the Mainland's rapid economic and social development, Macao students have been drawn north to enhance their employability and competitiveness. Being competent in the language is also crucial for students to increase their level of cultural knowledge. With this increasing demand from Macao students, Mainland educational institutions must understand the problems these students face while adapting to the teaching style of the Mainland and subsequently help them to improve their learning efficiency. Language itself is also one of the learning goals for those choosing to study in the Mainland.

4.2. Language of Instruction

Language is the quickest and most effective and commonly used communication tool that people use during interactions. It serves as a bridge and bonding force in people's communication. In a learning environment, language is not only a means of spreading knowledge, but also a direct tool for interaction between teachers and students and between students themselves. Language is a crucial part of culture. As the main method for foreign groups to understand and adapt to local culture, language learning plays a fundamental role in the process of cultural adaptation. Studies have revealed that international students experience considerable language barriers while studying abroad, and a lack of English language skills is one of the biggest obstacles for Chinese students pursuing higher education in the UK [26,27]. The question remains whether Macao students, who did not receive Mandarin training from a young age, encounter language adaptation problems when they attend universities in the Mainland and whether this affects their cultural adaptation to higher education there.

Mandarin is the official language in China, and it is also the prescriptive language in extracurricular activities. Macao has a 100 year Portuguese colonial history, which has determined the living habits of Macao people. In terms of the educational environment, numerous differences exist between the Mainland and Macao. The most obvious difference relates to the language of instruction. Guangdong is the region representing one of China's most prominent dialects. Fundamentally speaking, Macao culture is rooted in that of Guangdong. Cantonese is the native language. Because most educational institutions in Macao conduct classes in Cantonese, the first major problem encountered by Macao students when studying in the Mainland is adaptation to the language environment. Interviews revealed that the process of adaptation that Macao students in this study underwent after moving to the Mainland had a considerable and far-reaching negative effect that hindered their learning.

" Our high school teachers mainly taught in Cantonese and sometimes in English. At this stage, I just feel moderately adapted (in terms of Mandarin at Mainland colleges). Before I studied in the Mainland, I had never learned Mandarin. Sometimes it takes a long time for me to understand what someone is saying. My university didn't set up any Mandarin training. I think the school should offer such a language training class (Interviewee B).

Our high school education is conducted in Cantonese when not in English. When I first arrived in the Mainland, I felt very unaccustomed to the language environment. It took about two years to adapt to learning in Mandarin. (Interviewee D).

Macao middle schools mainly use Cantonese, followed by English. In the third grade, we take a Mandarin class. Because I have studied at Mainland schools, it [Mandarin as the language of instruction] will not affect my knowledge acceptance in the classroom (Interviewee I).

Classes in Macao are mainly taught in Cantonese. When some teachers speak too fast, we find it hard to understand the context of the lecture (Interviewee K).

I took Mandarin lessons before. Since elementary school, I have been studying in the Mainland, so I am able to speak Mandarin. But the university has not provided us with Mandarin training. I think it should be offered because many Macao students come here without any foundation in Mandarin. They also have problems communicating with classmates, but after a year or two of training, they are fine. However, they will graduate soon after the training (Interviewee L).

My listening skills are not bad, but my speaking skills are relatively poor. It is very difficult to understand certain teachers when they speak, especially those with an accent and those who roll their tongues (Interviewee E)."

Clearly, inadequate language ability has seriously hindered the cultural adaptation of Macao students in education in the Mainland, and this adaptation process generally takes two years or more. The reasons for this are twofold. Before reunification, due to a shortage of teachers and other reasons, primary and secondary schools in Macao generally lacked Mandarin training, and Cantonese was used as the basic language of instruction. Although, in recent years, Macao primary and secondary schools have begun to offer courses in Mandarin, it is generally only in the ninth grade in junior high school that students are exposed to Mandarin phonetics and conversation. Macao high schools are mostly private, and each school has noticeable distinctions in terms of teaching philosophy and the subjects offered. Accordingly, Macao students rarely receive equal Mandarin training. To date, the acceptance of Mandarin in the educational process in primary and secondary education in Macao is still inadequate. The interviewees also generally reported that their Macao student peers also had obvious shortcomings regarding their level of Mandarin, and many students could only understand the most basic Mandarin. When someone speaks fast, understanding is hampered, and most students experience difficulty in discerning the flat tongue and retroflex, used in Mandarin, sometimes resulting in serious communication barriers. Many students do not even speak Mandarin when they first arrive in the Mainland to study.

Language is a carrier of thought and a direct expression of culture. From the perspective of teaching interactions, the inability to adapt to the language environment plays a negative role in the process of information exchange, interpersonal communication, and conceptual exchange for Macao students attempting to achieve their academic goals. First, because of differences in pronunciation and grammar between Cantonese and Mandarin, these two languages embody different manners of thinking. Failure of the conversion process to be successfully completed has a negative effect on students' uptake of teaching resources and academic knowledge. Students lacking language skills might be limited in terms of their academic progress because they find their instructors' speech to be too fast, pronunciation to be unclear, and use of long sentences and colloquial language to be difficult to understand, in addition to having trouble understanding text prompts [13]. Second, communication obstacles result from a lack of Cantonese skills among most teachers and classmates at Mainland colleges and universities, which prevents Macao students from effectively interacting with teachers and classmates. Macao students are unable to communicate as effectively and efficiently with their Mainland teachers and classmates as they would with their Macao peers, thus hampering improvements in teaching effectiveness. In some cases, Mainland teachers speak relatively quickly, which may hinder the curriculum progress of students who have a poor Mandarin foundation. If such difficulties persist, Macao students may lose their interest in learning and become distracted or even start missing classes, eventually hindering students in achieving their goals.

Although Macao students' Mandarin skills improve as they spend more time in the Mainland, interview data suggest that this adaptation process takes at least six months. However, most people require two years, and some are not even fully adapted after four years. This can lead to inadequate performance among Macao students in basic courses during the first two years at the university, which in turn directly affects their success in senior professional courses.

Reduced learning interest and poor academic performance might lead to stereotypes suggesting that students from Macao are lazy, which would further weaken the interactions of Macao student groups with teachers and students from Mainland. This situation could lead to Macao students feeling

separated from Mainland teachers and student groups, which would not only seriously hinder the achievement of their academic goals, but also be detrimental to the development of their physical and mental health. From the perspective of learning and mastering knowledge and skills, the longer it takes for Macao students to adapt to the Mainland language environment, the more difficult it becomes for them to learn effectively. In the long term, it might even cause them to lose the knowledge, skills, and interpersonal relationships that they should be able to master and develop in the process of studying in the Mainland, which could negatively affect their lifelong development.

4.3. Social Network

In addition, as a result of weak Mandarin skills and the lack of relevant language training courses in schools, Macao students may lack language communication skills and feel embarrassed while interacting with Mainland teachers and students who speak Mandarin, making it difficult for them to integrate, and thus leading to the formation of a relatively isolated group.

“All of the students in this class have been together for three years because the older students had classes together and the junior students also had similar classes. I think there are some gaps between local students and foreign students. In cases where there are many of us, we form our own group, whereas some classes only have three or four foreign students. We tend to rely on students who are in a similar situation as our own. This sometimes affects my learning; for example, when I cannot find another student from a different region for doing a class assignment together (Interviewee A).

By my senior year, I still only knew 70% to 80% of my classmates (Interviewee I).

Although I have been in the same class for three years, I still cannot say that I know all of the people in the class. We have a local student in the same room. Through her, I have been able to meet many local students and expand my communication range, which has helped me a lot in my studies (Interviewee F).

There is a gap between local and foreign students. Local students feel that the foreign students are cold and will hesitate to communicate with them. Sometimes foreign students are just shy. In this way, opportunities for communication are lost (Interviewee J).

I don't know other students very well. Previously, I had classmates in the same dormitory and on the same floor. When we returned to the dormitory, we would say hello (Interviewee C).”

Macao students face many problems in social interactions, such as difficulty in finding study partners, narrow social scope, and limited daily communication with classmates. Due to the lack of cooperation from and exchange with Mainland students, Macao students form a relatively isolated group. Some students do not know each other despite spending four years in the same college. Communication between students plays a crucial role in the teaching process. Through exchanges with students from the Mainland, Macao students can expand their circle of friends and improve their understanding of an adaptation to the lifestyle of Mainlanders at the micro level. Classroom interactions between Mainland and Macao students can provide alternative perspectives during problem solving, stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning, and maximize benefit to the group by using every individual's skills. Interviews revealed that the Macao student group in this study generally engaged in insufficient communication with their Mainland classmates, making it difficult for them to achieve their learning goals through interpersonal communication.

5. Discussion

Qualitative research methods are highly relevant and valuable for research and education in cross-cultural adaptation [28]. As the most critical education base in modern society, schools are where individuals receive their education, accumulate cultural resources, and obtain human capital [29]. Macao students' adaptation to higher education in the Mainland not only influences their academic performance and career development, but also affects human resource development and sociocultural

integration between Macao and Mainland. Obvious differences exist between Macao and the Mainland in terms of education system, ideology, and culture. However, effectively adapting to the style of teaching in the Mainland will improve Macao students' learning efficiency and help them to achieve their academic goals. Conversely, the inability to adapt to higher education in the Mainland will affect these students' academic performance and potentially delay the completion of their university education. This will limit their employment competitiveness and prevent them from achieving their original goals. Macao students studying at Mainland universities might ultimately affect the overall development of human resources in Macao (Table 3).

The results revealed that Macao students opted to study in the Mainland for individual career development, which encouraged them to adapt to the Mainland society and culture. This finding is consistent with Lauffs et al.'s study that highlights that learning starts at the individual level, influenced by students' expectations, knowledge, and attitudes [30]. Additionally, Leea and Ciftcib find that when international students are open to different cultures, they are more willing to explore a different cultural life and initiate contact with people in the host culture [31]. Language plays a key role in Macao students' cross-cultural adaption. This is consistent with the findings of some studies. Masgoret et al. suggest that foreign language proficiency is one of the important contributors to effective communication [32]. A study by Jian and Hua also shows that language proficiency is positively related to uncertainty reduction and cross-cultural adaptation [33]. Kumpfer et al. find that learning programs designed for English-speaking families fail to meet the learning needs of non-English-speaking populations in their own country or in other countries where the content, language, and recruitment methods of the program do not reflect their culture [34].

Table 3. Findings of cross-cultural adaptation of Macao students.

Adaptation	Result
Motivation of the study	Potential employment opportunities, language learning, personal independence
Language of instruction	Difficulty in knowledge acceptance in the classroom, reduced learning interest
Social network	Poor relationships with local students, stereotypes, lack of support for learning

Moreover, social networking is essential for cross-cultural adaption. Communication ability, the ability to establish interpersonal relationships, and the ability to handle psychological stress are the three major dimensions influencing cross-cultural adaptation [4,35]. Hammer et al. find that in a new cultural environment, sojourners must build close ties with friends and compatible others in the host culture [36]. In Canada, international students in the integration cluster perceived less discrimination and had a higher score on tolerance [37]. Social networks have multiple functions, including assisting individuals in gaining the information required for their studies and life. Information seeking and scholarly motivations play a crucial role in cross-cultural adaptation [38]. In America, Django finds that Spanish people can create a deeper sense of community, which leads to Hispanics feeling included and like insiders [39]. This study reveals that the same is also true for Macao students who speak Cantonese in Mainland China campuses, where Mandarin is the preferred language for communication.

6. Conclusions

Cultural adaptation is a complex process, and despite efforts to plan the learning program and execute it sensitively, unforeseen challenges may still arise. Hence, the target community's perspectives must be considered in cultural adaptation [40]. If a program does not include elements required by the target cultural context, its content and delivery may need to be modified and adapted to better match that culture [41]. The study results are effective for use as a reference among teachers when designing

corresponding educational strategies and among education administrators and program coordinators to formulate guidelines for improving programs and support of resources.

The lack of adaptation to the language of instruction is the most direct, prominent, and enduring problem that Macao students tend to encounter when studying in the Mainland. Obstacles in language communication have a substantial negative effect on classroom listening, teacher–student and student–student interactions, and social practice. Because of a lack of teaching exchanges, Mainland teaching institutions, teachers, and students lack a basic understanding of Macao students’ original language of instruction. Schools and teachers tend to believe that Macao students have an adequate foundation in Mandarin before going to the Mainland for education; consequently, universities do not often provide language training. Although some colleges and universities in the Mainland arrange foundational courses for students who have not achieved satisfactory results in the Joint Examination of Overseas Chinese and Students from Macao, the content of the foundation courses is still based on relevant knowledge-based training and guidance for students who will soon take courses taught in the Mainland; no special language tutoring courses for Mandarin are generally offered. Macao students can only learn Mandarin through classroom instruction. Despite the absence of specialized training, Macao students’ adaptation time to the language environment can be as short as six months or as long as four years. Nevertheless, many of these students may still fail to adapt to the Mandarin education environment, which directly restricts the learning potential of Macao students.

Strengthening the Mandarin language skills of Macao students is currently a priority. The government department of education could consider counting the universities in the Mainland that recruit students from Macao. They could then provide financial support to these schools, according to the number of students, for the provision of special language training courses for Macao students one month before their first semester at a Mainland university. Listening, reading, and speaking tests should be administered to ensure that every Macao student has basic Mandarin communication, listening, and reading skills before enrolling. Macao students should also be encouraged to actively learn Mandarin to accelerate their integration into the teaching environment and their cultural adaptation to the Mainland’s higher education system.

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