

Cultural Adaptation of International Students in Mandarin Language Learning in Zhejiang, China

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Received : April 9 2026
Accepted : April 20 2026

Revised : April 19 2026
Available Online : April 20 2026

ABSTRACT

Keywords:
*Cultural
Adaptation;
Mandarin
Language
Learning;
International
Students;
Multicultural
Classroom;
Mixed-methods*

This investigation is about cultural adaptation of international students learning Mandarin language in Zhejiang, China, through a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data from a questionnaire (n=32) were combined with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, using an explanatory sequential design. Quantitative findings showed that integration was the most preferred adaptation strategy (M=4.09), with assimilation, separation, and marginalization being the next most preferred in descending order. Correlation analysis indicated a strong positive correlation between integration and learning outcomes ($r=0.717$ $p<0.001$), meaning that students who not only kept touch with their home culture but also actively engaged with the host culture were more likely to demonstrate high levels of participation in the classroom, confidence in communication, and motivation for learning. Assimilation was also found to be

significantly positively correlated, whereas marginalization was negatively related to learning outcomes. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data accentuates the role of intercultural contact, the use of good adaptive techniques, and identity negotiation in students' learning experiences. They also indicated that mixing with various peers and using language actively help cultural adjustment and language development. This study based on acculturation theory and sociocultural perspectives, shows that cultural adaptation plays a major role in Mandarin language learning effectiveness. The results add to the literature by focusing on the importance of multicultural classroom interaction and offering teaching suggestions for enhancing Mandarin language teaching for international students.

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, there have been tremendous efforts toward the internationalization of higher education, with China being one of the preferred destinations for international students. The increase in the number of international students in China can be attributed to its growing international presence in the realm of higher education (Ding, 2016). The efforts towards the internationalization of higher education include national policies regarding the internationalization of students, including expanding scholarship programs and cultural diplomacy efforts (Ma & Zhao, 2018). The importance of the global marketing strategy for the Chinese language (Yalun, 2019), academic and cultural motivation contributes significantly to the growing numbers of international students in China (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Zhejiang Province is among China's premier educational centres, which boasts a significantly internationalized learning environment. Zhejiang is an important centre for transnational higher education (Mok & Xu, 2008), the diversity of international students at institutions within the province. In this type of environment, individuals of different cultures continuously interact across boundaries (Di et al., 2022). Classroom learning activities are strongly influenced by culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996), language acquisition is accomplished socially (Lan, 2014). Thus, acquiring Mandarin language skills in this context involves not only the process of mastering the language but also other elements of culture-building and socialization.

The concept of cultural adaptation is highly significant in affecting how international students learn. Theorists such as John W. Berry (2003) have argued that cultural adaptation is a dynamic phenomenon whereby people interact with a new culture through four approaches, including integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Sam and Berry (2010) extend this argument by focusing on the connection between the adaptation strategies used and both psychological and sociocultural adjustments. Similarly, Ward and Kennedy (1994) differentiate between

emotional wellness and functional social skills when examining cultural adaptation. It is important to note that cultural adaptation can be regarded as a central component, as opposed to a contextual element, of the learning process.

With regard to second language acquisition, cultural adaptation has much to do with communication and learning processes. In the literature, McCroskey & Richmond (1990) have put forward the notion of WTC, whereby the learner's willingness to communicate is determined not only by linguistic factors but also sociocultural ones. Likewise, Gass & Mackey (2014) emphasize that language learning takes place mainly through interactions and meaning negotiations. Wu (2009) has corroborated this statement by proving that peer interactions are vital for Mandarin language acquisition. From these studies, one may infer that culturally adapted students are more prone to communicate and, thus, develop their language skills.

In spite of the increased number of studies about international students in China, most researchers concentrate on issues that have been generalized into challenges like culture shock, language barriers, and academic adjustment. For example, Hussain and Shen (2019) analyse the difficulties that come with academic adaptation, whereas Wenhua and Zhe (2013) pinpoint the challenges that affect international students in general. Mulyadi et al. (2024) shed light on the effects of culture shock on students. Despite the important information provided by these researchers, their concentration is directed at adaptation in general without mentioning classroom dynamics. Tian et al. (2020) consider the academic experiences in higher education institutions, but they do not pay special attention to what happens in classrooms in particular. Wang et al. (2022) start addressing classroom engagement, yet the place of intercultural interactions in Mandarin learning environments has not received enough attention.

This gap is especially significant because Mandarin language classrooms serve as distinctive venues for intercultural interaction (S. Wu, 2023), facilitating concurrent and engaging linguistic and cultural learning (Zou & Yu, 2021). To understand how international students adjust to life in this circumstance, we need to look at both statistical trends and detailed personal stories.

Consequently, this research utilizes a mixed-methods approach to examine the cultural adaptation of international students in Mandarin language acquisition in Zhejiang, China. The study seeks to (1) discern patterns of cultural adaptation, (2) analyse elements that affect adaptation processes, and (3) investigate students' experiences in navigating intercultural learning environments by integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights. The results are anticipated to enhance the domains of applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and intercultural education, while also offering pedagogical insights for the advancement of Mandarin language instruction in progressively multicultural classrooms.

Cultural adaptation has been well discussed theoretically, especially within acculturation theory (John W. Berry's model). According to (Berry, 2003), frames adaptation as a process of intercultural contact involving four overarching strategies for responding to this contact, namely integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. These approaches show how much you keep your own culture while adapting to the Chinese culture. But in educational settings, particularly within multicultural classrooms abroad, these adaptive strategies impact not just social cohesion but also academic interaction and discourse styles.

From the above-reviewed literature, it is possible to highlight three main gaps in the existing literature: (a) lack of focus on the adaptation process in Mandarin language classes; (b) use of mixed methods to analyze both trends and in-depth information; and (c) the connection between adaptation and classroom dynamics. To address the identified gaps, the current research aims at using both quantitative and qualitative data on students learning Mandarin language in China (Zhejiang Province).

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, a mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential model was used. First, quantitative data were collected and analyzed, and afterwards, qualitative data were collected for explanation of quantitative results.

The study was performed at Zhejiang Normal University, China. The target population was international students taking part in Mandarin classes. 32 students participated in the questionnaire survey by means of convenient sampling method. Then, purposive sampling was used to choose 4 participants for qualitative interviews.

Quantitative data were obtained from the questionnaire based on the theory of acculturation suggested by John W. Berry. The questionnaire contained 30 statements covering the following five factors: integration, assimilation, separation, marginalization, and adaptation outcomes. Qualitative data were acquired through the semi-structured interviews devoted to discussing students' cultural adaptation, interaction with native peers in class, and their adaptation techniques. Each interview took around 5-10 minutes. Collection of the data included two stages: questionnaire distribution and interviews.

Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha coefficient, correlation and group comparison methods (t-tests and ANOVA) were used to analyze quantitative data. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic approach, including coding and categorization procedures. Integration of both types of data occurred during the interpretation stage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Cultural Adaptation

According to the descriptive statistics integration turns out to be the first choice of cultural adaptation strategy among international students in the first place ($M = 4.09$), then assimilation ($M = 3.70$), separation ($M = 3.08$), and marginalization ($M = 2.30$). In other words, most of the students keep their original cultural identity (to some extent) through an active contact with the host culture.

Table 1. Mean Scores of Cultural Adaptation Dimensions

Dimension	Mean
Integration	4.09
Assimilation	3.70
Separation	3.08
Marginalization	2.30
Adaptation	3.99
Outcomes	

The pre-eminence of integration as a cultural adaptation strategy aligns with John W. Berry's acculturation framework that regards integration as the optimal strategy for multicultural environments. Individuals who choose integration tend to have higher mental health and sociocultural competence.

This conclusion is further validated by Lai et al. (2023), who found that integration leads to a balanced adaptation in both academic and social settings. Additionally, Mahmood et al. (2026) underscored that integration can improve psychological well-being and satisfaction with academic life. Ward and Kennedy (1994) noted that integration promotes emotional adjustment and sociocultural competence, whereas Zhang & Goodson (2011) stated that integration is a significant predictor of psychosocial adaptation.

In general, it is safe to conclude that integration is the most efficient method of adaptation because it helps students preserve their culture while becoming involved in the host culture.

Cultural Adaptation and Learning Outcomes

Correlation analysis was performed to find out how cultural adaptation is related to learning outcomes.

Table 2. Correlation between Adaptation Dimensions and Learning Outcomes

Variable	r	p-value
Integration	0.717	< 0.001
Assimilation	0.686	< 0.001

Separation	-0.217	0.240
Marginalization	-0.409	0.022

There is a strong positive association between integration and adaptation results ($r = 0.717$, $p < 0.001$) showing that students who not only maintain both their cultures but also interact with the cultures actively are the ones who tend to have higher classroom participation levels, greater communication self-confidence, and increased motivation. Assimilation also correlates strongly with learning outcomes ($r = 0.686$, $p < 0.001$) which means that having the host culture's norms, especially academic ones, helps Mandarin learners engage. Marginalization is negatively related to learning outcomes ($r = -0.409$, $p < 0.05$), so students who don't identify with both cultures will have fewer chances of taking part in the class actively. On the other hand, separation does not correlate with learning outcomes which means that staying away from the host culture does not necessarily mean that the students won't do well in class.

The above connection may be understood using the theory of willingness to communicate (WTC). Willingness to communicate refers to a person's eagerness to communicate, and it depends on two factors - linguistic proficiency and sociocultural factors (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Cultural familiarity facilitates communication in intercultural settings (Chen et al., 2026). In summary, cultural adaptation appears to act as a critical predictor of learning, as it influences students' willingness to communicate.

Challenges in Cultural and Linguistic Adaptation

Even though the general adaptation pattern has been positive, qualitative results shed light on a number of difficulties faced by international students. Many of them mentioned the difficulty of understanding Mandarin tones and characters as well as the challenge of following the instructor when the speaking speed is too fast. These problems reveal the structural features of Mandarin and English as alphabetic languages.

Linguistically, the following were the barriers faced by the students in regard to the differences in approaches to instruction, expectations, and communication in the class. Gu & Maley (2008) identify the challenge that arises from unfamiliarity with academic cultures. This barrier is made more evident in the work by Hang & Zhang (2025), which emphasizes the need for proactive students who take responsibility in adapting themselves to the new academic environment. Tian et al. (2020) also note that differences in academic practices lead to confusion and decrease class participation.

Psychologically, anxiety and lack of confidence in oneself are among the issues identified. Stephen Krashen (1982) discusses in his Affective Filter Hypothesis how negative emotions make it difficult for the learners to engage in learning processes.

Intercultural Interaction as a Mechanism of Adaptation

The study results reveal that intercultural interaction is a powerful tool in cultural adaptation and language learning. Students made the most out of the diversity through group work and informal communication with their peers. Using a language code (switching between Mandarin and English) appeared to be an effective way of helping interaction.

The findings of this study lend strong credibility to Long's theory on the importance of interaction in second language acquisition. Interaction can play a crucial role in helping second language learners process input and output and thus develop their language skills (Gass & Mackey, 2014). Furthermore, interaction plays a significant role in facilitating the second language acquisition process (M. Wang & Devitt, 2026). In general, intercultural interaction can be regarded as a critical tool connecting culture adaptation and language acquisition processes.

Cultural Identity and Adaptation Strategies

The result shows that in general, students still keep their original culture, but at the same time, due to their openness and adaptability, they change their culture. This doesn't result in the loss of identity but rather the development of a more flexible and dynamic self.

The above discussion shows the existence of identity negotiations in which cultural identities of people are managed and reconstructed in an intercultural context. According to Ting-Toomey & Dorjee (2018), identity is shaped continually by communication and interaction between cultures. In like manner, Zhu (2005) observes that intercultural communication entails adjusting cultural performances while retaining one's identity components.

Furthermore, various methods of adaptation were adopted by the students including language practice, observation, questioning, and community interaction. These practices show agency of learners in the sense that they actively manage their adaptation process in line with self-regulated learning theory.

Integrated Discussion

This study through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies has revealed that cultural adaptation is a key factor in shaping learning outcomes in Mandarin language classrooms. The strong correlation of integration with learning outcomes backed by the students' narratives points out that adaptation not only fosters participation but also enhances communicative competence too.

Taking into account the sociocultural approach, the process of learning can be considered an interactive one. According to Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is formed by

means of social interaction, while according to De Valenzuela (2014), learning happens through engaging in culturally-mediated activities. As a result, the students who adapt culturally in higher degrees would participate in classroom interaction actively, leading to improved language acquisition.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the international students' cultural adaptation to learning Mandarin in a multicultural classroom at Zhejiang, China. The results show that integration is the principal adaptation method, which means that most students want to keep their cultural identity and at the same time actively participate in the culture of the host country. One key area this research highlighted is that cultural adaptation plays a vital role in learning achievements. Students that are at the levels of integration and assimilation not only participate more but also communicate with greater confidence and show higher motivation in Mandarin learning. On the other hand, a negative link was found between marginalization and learning results, pointing to the fact that cultural disconnection can be disadvantageous. Besides, qualitative data indicates that cultural adaptation remains a continuous process influenced by intercultural contact, language skills, and personal strategies. Students do not only change their cultural identities but also try different ways to adapt, and this subsequently leads to better learning experiences. Overall, this paper illustrates that cultural adaptation should not be considered as a mere background factor but rather as a fundamental element in language learning in multicultural settings.

The results of this research can be used in Mandarin language teaching in international contexts in many ways. First of all, teachers need to give an impetus to intercultural interaction in the classroom by means of group discussions and collaborative activities. Apart from supplementing language skills development, such interaction will improve cultural adaptation. Secondly, it is important to have a supportive and inclusive learning environment in which students' anxiety is minimized and their confidence in Mandarin usage is maximized. This could be done through the use of different teaching methods and giving positive feedback. Besides, culture should be a major part of language teaching so that students can fully grasp the sociocultural dimension of the language and, also, this integration could lead to stronger connection and more effective learning. Lastly, teachers should appreciate the fact that students are from different cultural backgrounds and they should give students a chance to show their cultures as well. This will not only help the students understand each other better but also will encourage the development of an integrative adaptation strategy.

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