

An Investigation of International Students' Experiences of Coping with Intercultural Communication Challenges

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Abstract: This study investigates international postgraduate students' intercultural communication experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on communication challenges, coping strategies, and the perceived development of intercultural awareness. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with eight international postgraduate students in the United Kingdom, the study adopts a qualitative approach to explore participants' lived experiences. The findings suggest that communication challenges arose from linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and the restrictions associated with COVID-19. To navigate these difficulties, participants employed reduction strategies, compensatory strategies, and strategies extending beyond immediate interactions. The findings also indicate that intercultural encounters contributed to shifts in students' intercultural awareness, influencing their perceptions of cultural differences and responses to subsequent communication challenges. Conversely, intercultural awareness shaped how participants interpreted and managed these experiences. The study offers pedagogical implications for supporting international students' intercultural development and promoting more inclusive practices within higher education contexts.

Keywords: intercultural communication, communication challenges, coping strategies, intercultural awareness, international students

1. Introduction

COVID-19 substantially changed higher education teaching and policies (Wu and Munthali, 2021)[1]. Lockdowns and quarantines disrupted mobility and transformed international students' learning (Chang et al., 2021)[2]. While many pursued overseas education for academic benefits (Liu et al., 2021)[3], intercultural interactions were reshaped by online learning, distancing, and varying pandemic responses (Humphreys et al., 2021)[4].

International students are often more vulnerable than domestic peers when adapting to new environments (Sherry et al., 2010)[5]. Cultural differences further exacerbate communication challenges (Baker, 2015)[6]. To navigate these, students employ varied coping strategies (Hua et al., 2012)[7], which may reshape their intercultural awareness (ICA) and understandings of cultural differences (Baker, 2009)[8].

Conducted at a UK university, this study explores PGT international students' intercultural communication experiences, addressing three research questions: (1) the communication challenges they encounter, (2) the coping strategies they employ, and (3) the perceived impact of these experiences on their intercultural awareness.

While quantitative studies often examine intercultural competence (Liu et al., 2021; Vu et al., 2021)[3][9], qualitative research on how IC and coping influence ICA during COVID-19 remains limited. Thus, this study aims to provide pedagogical insights for supporting intercultural learning in higher education.

2. Literature review

2.1 Intercultural communication and awareness

Within contemporary higher education, English frequently functions as a lingua franca (ELF), where mutual intelligibility and the negotiation of meaning supersede idealised native-speaker norms. Consequently, successful intercultural communication (IC) requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to navigate cultural complexity. Adopting a non-essentialist perspective, this study views culture as dynamic, fluid, and continuously negotiated through interaction rather than as a fixed national characteristic. From this perspective, intercultural awareness (ICA) is conceptualised not as a static set of knowledge or skills (cf. Byram, 1997)[10], but as an evolving, context-dependent process involving the recognition of cultural diversity and critical reflection on one's own assumptions.

2.2 Challenges, coping strategies, and the research gap

International students frequently face linguistic and sociocultural barriers during IC, including unfamiliar accents,

communication anxiety, and differing interactional expectations. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated this by limiting spontaneous interaction and non-verbal cues through online learning and social distancing. To navigate these difficulties, students employ various coping strategies—ranging from linguistic compensation and reduction (Dörnyei, 1995) [11] to the mobilisation of interpersonal resources such as flexibility and collaborative meaning-making.

While existing research has extensively documented these challenges and strategies, they are often examined separately and predominantly through quantitative approaches focused on measuring intercultural competence. Less attention has been paid to students' subjective, qualitative accounts of how communication challenges and coping mechanisms collectively shape the development of ICA, particularly within the unique, disrupted context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and data collection procedure

This study employed purposive and convenience sampling to recruit eight full-time postgraduate taught (PGT) international students (five females, three males) from diverse linguistic backgrounds at a UK university. In accordance with BERA (2018)[12] ethical guidelines, all participants provided informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic via semi-structured online interviews using Microsoft Teams, which accommodated public health restrictions while capturing verbal and non-verbal cues. The interview protocol, refined following a pilot study, explored participants' intercultural communication challenges, coping strategies, and perceived development of intercultural awareness. To facilitate nuanced expression, participants could choose their interview language; two opted for Mandarin Chinese, while six chose English.

3.2 Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim; Mandarin transcripts were translated into English and cross-reviewed by a bilingual researcher. Data underwent thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)[13]. After active familiarisation, inductive codes were generated, collated, and refined into themes. Ongoing reflexive discussions with an independent researcher enhanced confirmability and minimised bias.

4. Finding and Discussion

4.1 Intersecting linguistic, cultural and Covid-related challenges

Participants described intercultural communication (IC) as intersecting linguistic, cultural, and pandemic-related challenges rather than isolated barriers. Linguistic difficulties frequently triggered anxiety and concerns over legitimacy. For instance, Jacob felt "much, much more comfortable" with fellow international students, while Alice felt "non-existent" due to conversational difficulties. Rather than simple linguistic deficits, participants evaluated themselves against idealised native-speaker norms, supporting ELF perspectives that emphasise negotiation over native-like proficiency (Jenkins, 2009; Halic et al., 2009)[14][15].

Culturally, participants often sought safety in perceived similarity. Sophia remained within a "comfort zone" of Asian peers, noting it involved "less chance of facing social rejection". Such networks provide emotional security during adjustment (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015)[16]. However, expectations of exclusion also shaped interactions; Isabelle hesitated to engage deeply with Europeans, fearing they wouldn't want to interact with "yellow people," though she acknowledged this as a problematic generalisation. This reflects the ongoing negotiation of identity (Darvin and Norton, 2015)[17] and aligns with non-essentialist views of culture as dynamic (Baker, 2015; Holliday, 2000)[6][18].

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified pre-existing challenges. While online platforms offered minor benefits like reviewing recorded lectures, masks and digital environments largely obstructed non-verbal cues. Pandemic practices also became sites of identity negotiation; Isabelle eventually abandoned mask-wearing to "follow the mainstream" after feeling simultaneously hyper-visible and socially "non-existent". Consistent with Humphreys et al. (2021)[4], COVID-19 restrictions intensified the linguistic and sociocultural complexities of IC.

4.2 Coping as flexible meaning-making: from immediate repair to extended intercultural learning

Participants described coping as a flexible process of managing uncertainty and maintaining relationships, extending beyond immediate conversational repair. While reduction strategies like avoidance were used—such as Jacob intentionally avoiding political discussions to prevent "trouble in our relationship"—these functioned adaptively as relational strategies rather than mere communicative deficiencies (Dörnyei, 1995; Ellis, 1994)[11][19].

More commonly, students relied on collaborative meaning-making, such as paraphrasing and checking comprehension. Jacob noted that "all I can do is just keep checking", reflecting ELF perspectives where communication is jointly negotiated rather than judged against native norms (Jenkins, 2009; Baker, 2015)[14][6]. This collaborative effort was often distributed across social networks; Isabelle, for example, relied on an Indian peer to simplify a French student's complex expressions. This highlights the role of supportive networks in facilitating intercultural adaptation (Brown, 2009)[20].

Furthermore, participants actively mobilised multilingual resources. Jacob's use of Korean and Chinese words with peers exemplifies translanguaging, demonstrating the strategic use of full linguistic repertoires to construct meaning rather than reflecting inadequate English proficiency (Wei, 2018)[21]. Finally, coping extended post-interaction through self-directed learning. Alice researched unfamiliar topics after conversations to grasp the "overall picture" and express ideas better next time. Such practices frame adaptation as an ongoing acquisition of contextually relevant knowledge (Ward et al., 2020)[22].

4.3 Intercultural awareness as an evolving and uneven process

Participants demonstrated varying levels of intercultural awareness following their UK experiences, revealing it as an uneven process rather than an inevitable outcome of cultural exposure. Some developed flexible, reflexive understandings. Mia, referencing high/low-context styles, became "more open and receptive," illustrating how multilinguals negotiate multiple identities across contexts (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009; Baker, 2015)[23][6]. Similarly, Alice reconsidered her stereotype of Americans as "playful party people," recognising individual characteristics over simplistic cultural explanations. This aligns with fluid, non-essentialist views of culture (Holliday, 2000; Baker, 2015)[18][6].

Conversely, ICA development is non-linear. Despite prior intercultural exposure, Benjamin maintained essentialist views, attributing individual behaviours to a "typical British" identity and a "superiority complex". This reinforces that ICA requires critical reflection, not just contact (Baker, 2015; Matsuo, 2014)[6][24].

Emotionally, increased openness did not always equate to belonging. While Isabelle built resilience ("Just let it go") indicating a growing tolerance for ambiguity (Ward et al., 2020)[22], Jacob missed his home country and lacked a "sense of belonging". As previous research notes, international students can simultaneously develop intercultural appreciation and heightened attachment to their cultural origins (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; Sun and Hagedorn, 2016)[16][25]. Ultimately, ICA emerges not simply through exposure, but through active engagement with the tensions and ambiguities embedded within intercultural experiences.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights that international students' intercultural communication is shaped by a complex interplay of linguistic demands, cultural expectations, identity negotiations, and contextual factors. Coping strategies extend beyond mere linguistic repair to encompass collaborative meaning-making and ongoing learning. Crucially, intercultural awareness (ICA) does not emerge automatically from cultural exposure; rather, it evolves unevenly through individuals' active interpretation and negotiation of communication challenges, supporting non-essentialist perspectives (Baker, 2015; Holliday, 2000)[6][18].

Practically, universities must move beyond deficit-oriented views and foster opportunities for critical reflection and collaborative intercultural engagement (Deardorff, 2006)[26]. Future research, addressing the limitations of this study's small sample and pandemic-specific context, should employ longitudinal designs and include host students' perspectives to more comprehensively map how ICA develops over time.

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