

Supporting Chinese-Speaking International Students

Guidance for Academic Staff | Swansea Business School | September 2026

Most of our Chinese-speaking international students are on one-year programmes: top-up degrees and taught postgraduate courses. They do not have time for gradual acculturation. By the time a language development programme makes a measurable difference, they are already writing their dissertations. This guide offers practical strategies that can make a difference this semester.

Common Behaviours and What To Try

What You See	Cultural Context	What To Try Instead
Rarely or never asks questions in class	In Chinese educational culture, students listen and absorb; asking questions is not part of the learning norm	Provide an anonymous channel: paper slips, Google Form, or Padlet. Review answers next session
Says "Yes, I understand" but work suggests otherwise	Affirming the teacher is the cultural default; it signals respect, not necessarily comprehension	Replace "Do you understand?" with "Tell me one thing you took away from today"
Referred to support but does not follow through or engage	Unfamiliar format; unsure what to say or ask in a one-to-one English setting	Give a specific question to bring: "Ask them to help you with X." Follow up: "What did they suggest?"
Silent in group discussion	Peer discussion as a learning method is unfamiliar; speaking imperfect English in front of peers adds pressure	Give a short written task before the discussion so students can prepare thoughts in advance
Written work looks translated from Chinese	Thinking in L1 first is a normal bilingual cognitive strategy, not a sign of deficiency (Zhang, 2023)	Separate language feedback from content feedback. Acknowledge the argument before correcting expression
Does not use transcription tools despite struggling to follow lectures	Assumes they are not allowed, or does not know the option exists	Tell students explicitly in week 1: "You are welcome to use a transcription app or recording device in my sessions"

Context That Matters for Feedback

- **"Yes, I understand" is a cultural default, not a learning confirmation.** In Chinese educational settings, students are expected to listen and absorb. Asking questions or admitting confusion in front of the class is simply not part of the learning culture most students grew up in. This does not change overnight. Instead of asking whether students understand, ask them to show what they took away.
- **Writing in Chinese first, then translating, is a legitimate strategy.** Thinking in one's first language is a well-documented bilingual cognitive approach (Zhang, 2023), yet institutional monolingual ideologies can discourage students from drawing on their first language, even when it would benefit their learning (Zheng and Lawrence, 2023). Chinese and English academic writing also follow different rhetorical structures: Chinese argumentation tends to build context before stating the point, while English leads with the claim (Kaplan, 1966). Feedback should distinguish language accuracy from content quality.
- **Transcription tools are standard professional practice.** Many students do not know they are allowed to use them. A one-line announcement in week 1 removes a barrier students will not ask about on their own. Where recording concerns exist, that is a fair conversation between colleagues, but where it is permitted, making it explicit helps. Language classes are a long-term investment; transcription tools help with next week's lecture.

Getting Started: Practical Steps for Students

Things you can do this week to get more from your programme

You are here for one year. That is not much time, and everything is new: the language, the teaching style, the assessment methods. The following are practical steps you can take right now to make the most of your time here. None of them require perfect English.

In Lectures

1. **Use a transcription app or recording device.** You are allowed to do this. Apps like Otter.ai, Microsoft 365 dictation, or iFlytek transcription can give you an accurate written record of the lecture to review afterwards. If you are not sure whether your lecturer allows recording, ask them. Most will say yes.
2. **Write notes in Chinese if that helps.** You can always translate your notes later. What matters is capturing the ideas while you hear them. Thinking in your first language is a normal and effective learning strategy.
3. **Use the anonymous question channels.** If your lecturer provides a Google Form, Padlet, or paper question box, use it. Your question will not have your name on it. Many of your classmates have the same questions but are also not asking.

With Assessments

4. **Draft in Chinese first if you need to.** It is better to develop a strong argument in Chinese and translate it into English than to write a weak argument in English from the start. Your lecturers care about the quality of your thinking, not just your grammar.
5. **Ask your lecturer for specific feedback.** Instead of waiting for a grade, ask: "Can you tell me if my argument structure is clear?" or "Is my main point coming through?" Specific questions get useful answers.
6. **Learn the difference between Chinese and English essay structure.** In Chinese academic writing, you build up to your main point. In English, you state your main point first, then support it with evidence. This is not about which is better. It is about knowing what your lecturers expect.

With Academic Support

7. **When you go to academic or language support, bring a specific question.** Do not go with "I need help with my essay." Go with "Can you help me write a stronger introduction for my literature review?" or "Can you check whether my paragraph transitions make sense?" You will get much more out of the session.
8. **It is OK to not understand everything immediately.** Your lecturers know that English is not your first language. The university accepted you because your academic ability is strong enough. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It is how the system is designed to work here.

Remember: you were accepted onto this programme because you are capable of completing it. The English language barrier is real, but it is not a reflection of your academic ability. Use every tool available to you.

References

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