

A study on English language proficiency and culture integration influencing Chinese students' academic achievements in the UK higher education

1 Introduction

This study aims to provide insights into the learning experiences of Chinese students in the UK by examining the extent to which two key factors—English language proficiency and cultural integration—influence their academic performance. English proficiency will be assessed using IELTS scores. The IELTS (International English Language Testing System) measures international students' skills in speaking, writing, listening, and reading in academic contexts. Officially recognized by the UK Home Office (Pearson, 2020), the IELTS test is widely accepted by educational institutions, government authorities in English-speaking countries, and employers worldwide as a standard measure of English language proficiency (IELTS.COM). In this study, students' IELTS band scores will be used as an indicator of their English proficiency.

Cultural integration is selected as the second factor based on previous research.

According to Isobel Kai-Hui Wang (2018), who investigated the transitional experiences of long-term Chinese students in UK higher education, the most stressful challenges during the early stages of adjustment were: Language barriers, which significantly impacted academic, psychological, and social adjustment. Another element is Cultural

differences in educational expectations, which made it difficult for students to adapt to the British education system.

These findings applied to both undergraduate and postgraduate Chinese students.

Similarly, a study on sociocultural adaptation by Chen and Ross (2015) found that Chinese students struggled more with social integration than academic adjustment.

Furthermore, Bianchi and Martini (2023) emphasized that academic and social integration are crucial for the success and well-being of international students, though they present significant challenges. Academic integration refers to how well students adapt to the academic standards and expectations of their host institutions (Gani, 2017).

Based on these findings, cultural integration is selected as the second variable to investigate in this study.

The relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance remains a controversial issue. Some studies have found no clear link between IELTS scores and academic achievement (e.g., Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Dooley & Oliver, 2002).

Others, such as Elder (1993), have identified a slight correlation. Additionally, other researchers have noted that while language is not the sole determinant, it remains an important factor influencing international students' academic success (Chen & Sun, n.d.).

This research aims to determine whether IELTS scores can serve as a reliable predictor of Chinese students' academic performance in the UK.

This study will focus on the perspectives of Chinese students and employ a mixed-methods approach for data collection and analysis. Participants will be recruited from a

Chinese IELTS training center, where students have achieved the required scores for university admission. A longitudinal follow-up will be conducted over four months, culminating at the end of the students' first academic term—a period during which many will also face cultural shock. Academic performance will be measured using students' average grade point (GPA) from their first term.

My research questions are:

RQ1: What are the primary academic, social, and cultural challenges encountered by Chinese international students within the UK higher education system?

RQ2: What adaptive strategies do Chinese international students employ to navigate and overcome academic challenges in UK universities?

RQ3: How does the process of intercultural adaptation in the UK shape psychological, social, and academic transformations among Chinese international students?

2 Literature review

Understanding the key factors that influence the academic performance of international students is essential for educators, policymakers, and institutions aiming to enhance student success and sustain the UK's reputation as a leading global education destination.

This literature review critically examines the primary factors impacting the academic performance of Chinese students in the UK. It explores current debates within the field,

highlights areas of consensus and contention, and identifies gaps in the existing research. The goal is to establish a solid foundation for further investigation into how these factors interact and influence student outcomes. These are some key terms of this topic will be explained and some theoretical frame works will be reviewed.

2.1 Description of the IELTS Test

Before evaluating the quality of the IELTS test, it is important to first understand its structure. For those who may not be fully familiar with the test, the official IELTS website provides comprehensive resources, including handbooks for institutions, teachers, and students, as well as sample practice materials (IELTS, 2020).

The IELTS test is divided into four distinct modules: Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. It is offered in two formats: **IELTS Academic** and **IELTS General Training**.

The **Academic version** is intended for individuals applying to post-secondary education institutions. It assesses the English language skills required in academic settings. In contrast, the **General Training version** is designed for individuals planning to migrate to English-speaking countries, and it evaluates English proficiency in everyday, practical contexts such as workplace and social situations.

Scores are reported on a **nine-band scale**, ranging from **Band 1 (“non-user”)** to **Band 9 (“expert user”)**, providing a standardized measure of a test taker’s English language proficiency.

2.2 Frameworks links to Language proficiency and Culture integrations

In the following sections, I will have a view on two frameworks which related to language proficiency and factors influencing international students' academic performance in the UK.

2.2.1 Framework of Useful assessment

We use IELTS as a tool to assess students' language proficiency. When using an assessment tool, it is important to choose a right set of criteria to evaluate the test.

There is a framework provided by Green (2014), in this evaluation of assessment framework there are four parts to evaluate of useful assessments which are practicality, reliability, validity, and beneficial consequences. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. *The main qualities of useful assessment.*

The cone-shaped model illustrates the interrelationship between key qualities of effective assessment. At the base lies practicality, the foundation of any assessment system—if a test is not feasible to administer, then other qualities become irrelevant. At the top of the cone is the ultimate aim: the positive impact of the assessment, such as delivering

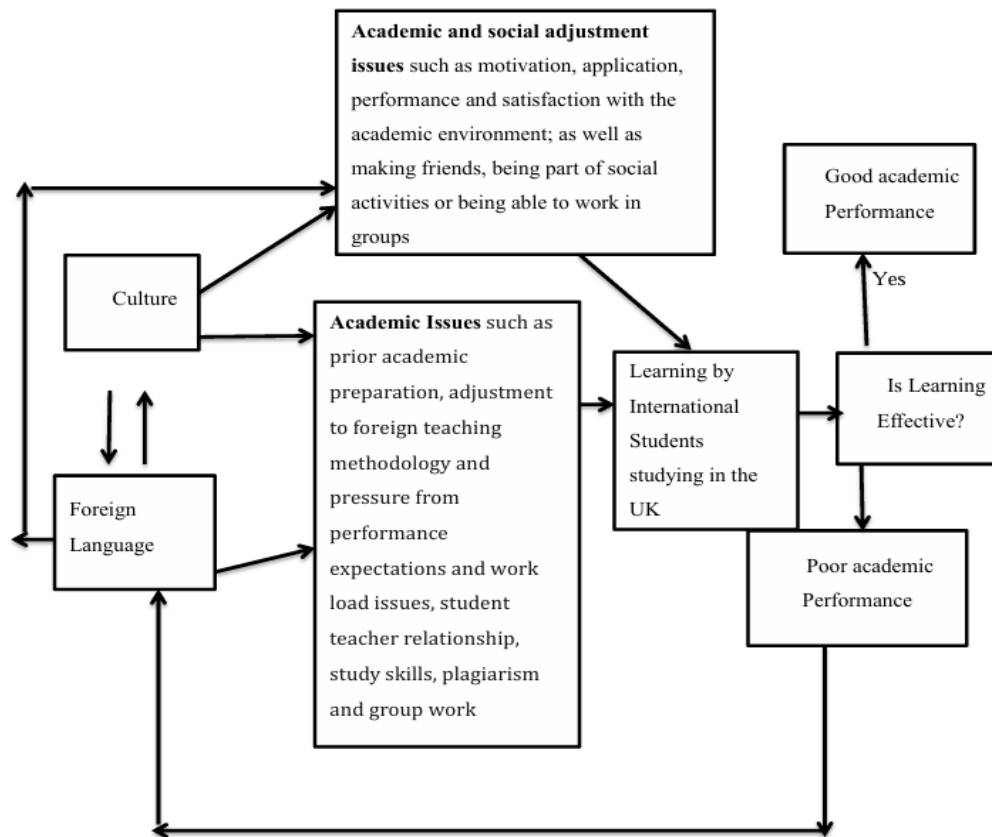
accurate evaluations of language skills that support informed decision-making. In between are two core qualities: reliability, which refers to the consistency of test scores, and validity, which reflects how well the test measures what it is intended to measure. As noted by Green (2014), additional aspects like authenticity and fairness are encompassed within this four-quality framework. This model was applied in the evaluation of the IELTS test, with the findings discussed in terms of these central assessment qualities.

2.2.2 Frame work of factors influencing international students performs in the UK

A wide range of frameworks and theories have been used to explain the experiences of international students in the UK, including Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital and Berry's (1997) acculturation theory. These theoretical lenses help contextualize the motivations, challenges, and academic adaptation processes of Chinese students in a UK higher education.

Ece and Inegbedion (2015), which addresses a key issue in UK higher education: identifying the determinants of student success in the context of rising tuition fees (post-2012 reforms) and an increased focus on institutional accountability. Their research contributes to broader discussions around equity, resource distribution, and student support systems. The authors frame their analysis using established models such as Tinto's student integration model and Bean's student attrition theory, both of which emphasize the importance of academic and social integration.

Framework for understanding critical factors influencing Academic Performance of International Students in the UK



After identifying the challenges Chinese students face while studying in the UK, I began conducting research focused on these specific factors.

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2.3 Key factors critical review: Language proficiency and Culture integration

The relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement has been widely debated, with particular emphasis on the predictive value of specific language

skills. A dominant thread in this discourse identifies reading proficiency as the most significant predictor of academic success. Studies in Australia by Dooley and Oliver (2002) and Oliver et al. (2012) revealed that among international students admitted with a minimum IELTS score of 6.0, reading ability was the sole skill significantly correlated with academic performance. Similarly, Kerstjens and Nery (2000) found reading proficiency to be the primary predictor of success for students entering programs with a 6.5 IELTS requirement.

However, contrasting findings highlight the critical role of writing proficiency. Li et al. (2010) argued that writing skills surpassed overall language proficiency in predicting academic success. Harrington and Roche (2014) similarly emphasized writing and vocabulary as key predictors, with reading showing no significant impact. Discipline-specific nuances also emerge: Woodrow (2006) found that speaking, listening, and writing—but not reading—correlated with performance in a program requiring a 6.5 IELTS score.

The variability in these findings may stem from inherent limitations in standardized language assessments. Moore and Morton (2005) noted disparities between IELTS writing tasks and authentic academic writing demands, a concern echoed by Deakin (1997) and Green (2007), who observed that students meeting IELTS writing thresholds often struggle with university-level assignments. Green (2007) and Johnson and Tweedie (2021) advocate for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, which prioritize extended, complex writing tasks over test-focused preparation. Additionally, Ginther and Yan (2017) cautioned that intensive test preparation may inflate reading scores through

multiple-choice strategies, potentially undermining the predictive validity of such assessments

These debates underscore the complexity of language proficiency as a predictor of academic success, suggesting that institutional and disciplinary contexts significantly influence outcomes. For Chinese students preparing for UK higher education, targeted training in both academic literacy (particularly reading and writing) and discipline-specific communication may be critical. This aligns with the proposed integration of cultural studies, which could address gaps in contextual knowledge and enhance the applicability of language skills in real-world academic and social settings.

2.4 Understanding of Culture integration mean to Chinese students

The cultural divide between Chinese and Western societies is notably broader than that between Western and other Asian cultures. For students from traditional mainland Chinese backgrounds, openly challenging the views of parents or teachers is often perceived as disrespectful (Chope & Consoli, 2006). This behavior is rooted in Confucian values, particularly filial piety, which emphasizes respect for parental authority, obedience, and a lifelong duty to care for one's elders (Pei-Wen & Yeh, 2005; Leong & Serafica, 1995). These deeply ingrained beliefs not only influence students' educational and career aspirations—such as the desire to study abroad—but also guide the collective family decision-making process (Deutsch, 2006).

Successful intercultural adaptation is essential for international students' academic success and psychological well-being. However, research highlights a range of stressors

faced by this population, including anxiety, depression, and feelings of social isolation (Bitsika et al., 2010). To address these challenges, culturally sensitive coping strategies are necessary (Ward & Kennedy, 2001). Padilla and Perez (2003) emphasize the importance of cultural competence—the ability to navigate unfamiliar social environments—as a crucial factor in adaptation. Nevertheless, Chinese students' tendency to prioritize academic success over social engagement can result in self-isolation and limited interaction with host cultures (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006).

Research consistently emphasizes the multiple stressors Chinese students encounter in the process of intercultural adaptation (Stoynoff, 1997). To navigate these difficulties, they often interact with different social groups on campus to meet various psychological and sociocultural needs. Bochner, McLeod, and Lin (1977) suggest that international students typically engage with three types of networks: host nationals, co-nationals, and other international students. While local peers often provide academic or language support, co-national relationships tend to offer emotional security. These connections can enhance cultural identity and reduce acculturation stress through shared experiences (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Maundeni, 2001; Woolf, 2007). However, individual differences in personality and adjustment capacity can complicate group dynamics (Lin, 2008). Kim (2001) cautions that co-national support networks, while comforting, can sometimes exacerbate stress and hinder intercultural growth. Similarly, prolonged reliance on these groups may limit motivation to engage with the local culture (Ward & Searle, 1991). Bodycott (2009) also notes that while co-national communities can support adaptation, they may strain familial expectations and intensify stress.

Effective intercultural adaptation depends largely on social integration and the development of meaningful relationships with host nationals, which are known to alleviate psychological distress (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Ward & Searle, 1991). However, building such relationships is often challenging. Chinese students in the UK recognize the importance of socialization but frequently struggle to establish genuine connections with local students (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Institutional initiatives aimed at promoting intercultural exchange are often inadequate, as cultural barriers and persistent stereotypes remain obstacles (Ie, 2009; Brown, 2010). Students must interpret host culture cues through their own cultural frameworks, complicating mutual understanding (Colvin & Jaffar, 2007). Moreover, socio-cultural stigmas may further hinder integration and friendship formation (Padilla & Perez, 2003).

According to Wilson (2011), thriving in multicultural settings requires students to step outside their comfort zones and build resilience in the face of cultural dislocation. Successful adaptation depends on both the international students' willingness to engage and the receptiveness of host nationals to establish reciprocal relationships. However, these dynamics are not guaranteed and add layers of complexity to the adaptation process.

3 Methodology

Understanding the philosophical foundations of a study is essential to gaining a deeper insight into its key concepts, particularly in terms of epistemology (how we come to know what we know), ontology (the nature of reality), axiology (the role of values in research),

and methodology (the research process). According to Crotty (1998), ontology is the foundation of any study and refers to the study of being. Srantakeos (2014) similarly defines ontology as the science of being, describing it as the nature of reality itself. Common ontological perspectives in research include realism and relativism (Crotty, 1998). Srantakeos (2013) notes that social research typically adopts one of two main ontologies: realism or constructionism. These ontological views shape the foundations of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Reichardt and Cook (1979) argued that different philosophical paradigms and research methods can be compatible. Pragmatism, in particular, provides researchers with the flexibility to choose the methods most appropriate for addressing their research questions. John and Onwuegbuzie (2004) state that pragmatism views social phenomena as both objective and socially constructed. Therefore, pragmatism is well-suited for this study, as it aims to explore students' perspectives and experiences while also maintaining an objective lens.

With this philosophical understanding, this study will adopt a mixed methods approach. Mixed methods research involves using both qualitative and quantitative paradigms, either in separate phases or in combination, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem (Creswell, 2005). Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) emphasize that combining these methods can lead to a deeper and more complete analysis. Greene (2007) also highlights that mixed methods are particularly effective for investigating complex social issues and phenomena.

Several researchers have identified key advantages to using mixed methods (Newman & Benz, 1998; Martens, 2003). First, different methods can serve different purposes within a single study. Second, comparing qualitative and quantitative data can help produce more validated conclusions. Third, qualitative data can be used to explain and contextualize quantitative findings. Fourth, integrating both types of data enhances the overall depth and richness of the research.

Integrating qualitative and quantitative data offers a more robust understanding of complex phenomena and enables the research questions to be addressed pragmatically. However, some concerns have been raised regarding the use of mixed methods. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008) point out that researchers may lack training in both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Despite this, mixed methods research allows for the strengths of one method to compensate for the weaknesses of the other, ultimately improving research quality (Bryman, 2016).

To further enhance the reliability and validity of the study, triangulation will be employed at the results stage. This involves using multiple methods to verify research findings. Mackey and Gass (2005) argue that triangulation not only strengthens the data but also improves the overall trustworthiness of the research by reducing potential researcher bias.

3.1 Research design

This research will adopt a mixed methods methodology, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The qualitative component will involve longitudinal semi-

structured interviews, with primary data collected over two phases spanning a period of four months.

The quantitative phase will be conducted at the beginning of the research. It will focus on collecting data regarding the number of students who have taken the IELTS examination at a specific training institution in China. This institution enrolls approximately 160 to 200 students annually. In this first stage, participants' IELTS scores will be gathered to support further analysis.

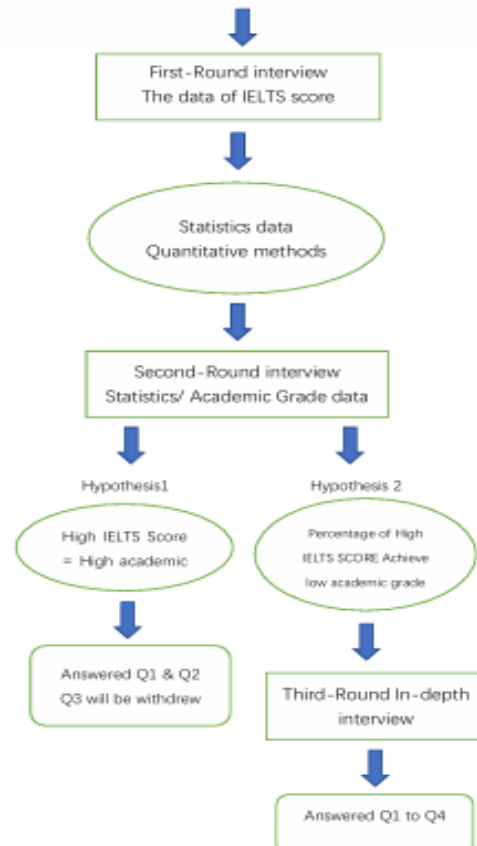
The first round of interviews will focus on understanding students' language proficiency based on their IELTS results. The second round of interviews will explore their academic performance in the UK, as well as their experiences of cultural integration. This phase will employ a mixed methods approach to examine how students adapt to academic and social environments in a new cultural context.

If, after the second-round interviews, results indicate that some students with high IELTS scores have achieved low academic grades, a third, in-depth qualitative interview will be conducted. This follow-up interview will aim to explore the underlying reasons for the discrepancy between language proficiency and academic performance.

The research process is illustrated below:

The total Number of students	IELTS Score Band			
	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5

* The Minimal UK High education entry score is 6.0. Postgraduate: 6.5 (minimum 6.0 in each component)



3.2 Research Tools: Questionnaire and Interview

Drever (1962) defines a questionnaire as “a series of questions dealing with some psychological, social, educational, etc., topic or topics, which is/are sent or given to a group of individuals, with the objective of obtaining data regarding a specific problem; Similarly, Oppenheim (1992) emphasizes that a questionnaire should be regarded as a crucial tool for data collection in research.

There are several types of questionnaires outlined by Oppenheim (1992)

- Mail (postal) questionnaires: which are sent to respondents who complete and return them independently;
- Self-administered questionnaires: presented directly to respondents by someone in an official or research-related role;
- Group-administered questionnaires: which are distributed to groups—such as children gathered under a teacher’s supervision—where the setting allows for structured instruction during completion.

In this study, an online questionnaire will be employed during the first stage of data collection, corresponding to the quantitative phase of the research. The primary aim of this questionnaire is to gather data on participants’ IELTS Band scores achieved in the examination, which will serve as a basis for further analysis.

3.2.1 Questionnaire design

Designing an effective questionnaire requires careful planning and thoughtful consideration from the very beginning of the development process (Roopa & Rani, 2012). The types of questions included should align with the overall purpose and objectives of the study. According to Roopa and Rani (2012), several types of questions can be used, including: Contingency questions (or cascade format), Matrix questions, Closed-ended questions, and Open-ended questions.

For this study, a mixed-question format will be employed in the online questionnaire. This will include a combination of Yes/No questions, multiple-choice items, and Likert-scale

questions, where participants will indicate their level of agreement or preference on a scale from 1 to 10, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” This combination aims to gather both structured data and nuanced insights from participants.

3.2.2 Pretesting questionnaire

According to Roopa and Rani (2012), pretesting a questionnaire is a crucial step in the research process, as it helps ensure the effectiveness and clarity of the instrument. The main purposes of pretesting include:

- A. Assessing whether the questions are appropriately framed,
- B. Evaluating if the wording of questions yields the intended responses,
- C. Ensuring that the sequence of questions is logical and effective,
- D. Confirming that the questions are comprehensible to all categories of respondents,
- E. Identifying whether additional or more specific questions are needed, or if some questions should be removed, and
- F. Determining whether the instructions provided to interviewers are sufficient.

Pretesting involves several key steps, including selecting a sample group, administering the questionnaire, and evaluating the results to identify any areas for improvement. In this study, the researcher will conduct pretesting using a pilot group comprising approximately 1% of the total participant population, as recommended by Arain and Campbell (2010). This process will help refine the questionnaire before full-scale data collection begins.

3.2.3 Interview

According to Hyman Herbert H. et al. (1975), four types of interviews are commonly used in the social sciences. These include: the structured interview, the open-ended (or unstructured) interview, the semi-structured interview, and the focus group interview.

Interviews serve to place the interviewer and the interviewee on a similar emotional level. This dynamic allows the conversation to delve deeply into the emotional core of the participant, potentially revealing the depth of their feelings and testing the authenticity of their responses (Hyman Herbert H. et al., 1975).

The semi-structured interview, in particular, offers the advantage of allowing for in-depth exploration of topics. Given its flexibility and depth, this research will utilize the semi-structured interview method.

Most qualitative longitudinal studies utilize interview-based methods (Carduff, 2013).

Therefore, this research will employ face-to-face semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool. Considering that the participants—Chinese students—may be communicating in a second language, face-to-face interviews offer the advantage of allowing interviewees to express themselves not only through words but also through facial expressions and body language. This method enables the interviewer to observe non-verbal cues and assist participants in articulating their thoughts, making the interview process more comfortable and effective for them.

4 Date analysis Methodology

This research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the data collected through interviews and questionnaires, respectively. Using a mixed-methods approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic by integrating numerical data with in-depth personal experiences and perspectives.

4.1Quantitative Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, means, and percentages, will summarize the participants' responses to closed-ended questions. Inferential statistics may also be applied to examine relationships or differences among variables, depending on the nature of the data. Statistical software, such as SPSS or Excel, will be used to assist in data entry, organization, and analysis.

4.2Qualitative Analysis

The data collected from semi-structured interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This involves transcribing the interviews verbatim, reading through the transcript's multiple times, and coding key ideas and concepts that emerge from the data. Themes will be identified through an inductive process, allowing patterns and insights to emerge naturally from the participants' responses. NVivo or manual coding methods may be employed to organize and categorize the data. This approach helps to explore participants' experiences, emotions, and viewpoints in greater depth, providing a richer context for the research findings.

By combining both analysis methods, the research aims to capture both measurable trends and deeper, more nuanced insights related to the research objectives.

5 Conclusion

Overall, the influence of language proficiency and cultural integration on academic performance is substantial and must be recognized by both UK higher education institutions and Chinese international students. By proactively addressing these elements, institutions can optimize their support mechanisms, while students can more effectively adapt to the academic and social environment, fostering reciprocal development. From a research perspective, Chinese students constitute a significant proportion of the global international student population. Consequently, they are frequently included in studies examining international student behaviors and experiences. Excluding this demographic may result in incomplete or skewed data, thereby compromising the development of inclusive and evidence-based strategies aimed at improving cross-cultural educational outcomes.

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