

China International Students Overcome Language Barriers with Defence Mechanisms

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This study aimed to understand the defence mechanism among China international student to handle the stress and anxiety due to language barriers in one of the Malaysia local university. The research methodology utilised in this research was the qualitative approach; five China international students participated in this research through purposive sampling and interviews were carried out. The interview session was audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, include member checking, peer-reviewing, being sensitive to ethical practice and appropriate arrangement of data collection. The findings of this study revealed the language barriers are difficulties in academic, poor English, differences in local accents and emotional states. Three defence mechanisms investigated which is denial, projection and identification. The researcher recommends that university and international students themselves should take appropriate steps to solve the language barriers.

Keywords: International student, defence mechanism, language barrier

The quality of Malaysia education system attracted a lot of international students coming to study, currently we have 30,341 international students enrolled at public higher education institutes (Malaysia Educational Statistics, 2019).

Most international students have the perception of overseas educational experience and study abroad would lead to better employment (Di Pietro, 2019). As of 2019, about 5.86 million of China citizens studied abroad from 1978, among them, over 1.53 million of China citizens still studying or conducting research study overseas (Ministry of Education, 2019). Thus, they become the largest source of outbound international higher education students in the world (Babones, 2019).

However, for China international students, language proficiency is also critical in terms of both the academic and social adjustment of international students. Mei (2017) stated that the language barrier experienced by international students in

the host country affects their capability to succeed in academic and social life. Language barrier also cause negative emotions and even into depression (Banjong, 2015). One of the factor is due to international students take longer time to learn the content that is not in their first language (Banjong, 2015; Liu, 2016).

Hence, study abroad and transition to a new country has become important (Baker, 2017). Yassin, Abdul Razak, Qasem, and Saeed Mohammed (2020) find that higher education institute need to concern about providing education for sustainable development. Although many were able to overcome their adjustment challenges to learning by being proactive there is more can be done from institution side to support international students (Deni, Tumar, Houghton, & Crosling, 2021).

However, not much qualitative research on the language barrier experience of international student, as well as focuses on a different subgroup of the whole student

population (Movahed, Mokhtar, & Hassan, 2019). Movahed et al. (2019) find that language barrier is one of the challenges faced by international students in Malaysia that has become an international education hub. Yassin et al. (2020) findings reveal that among international students in Malaysia, English language challenge has negative effective on learning sustainability, specifically in reading material, writing assignments and exam, as well as communicate with lecturers and classmates.

In this study, the researcher focused on one of the public universities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, this institution also has been developing international standards of education level to attract more international students to enrol (Yusop, 2016). The purpose of this case study is to understand the defence mechanism among China international student towards language barriers in the case university.

In this study, defence mechanism defined as an unconscious way to protect self from excessive stress and anxiety. The theory guiding this study is theory of defence mechanism (Freud & Bonaparte, 1954). Defence mechanisms serve an adaptive goal to protect individual self-esteem from overwhelming stress (Cramer, 2015). Hence, this theory help to understand different ways of China international students defence themselves from unpleasant emotions due to language barrier. There is positive correlation between defence mechanisms and emotional regulations to cope a stressful situation well (Sumanjali, Joseph, Samuel, & Jose, 2018).

This research intend to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the perceptions of language barriers faced by China international students in the case university.

2. To explore the use of defence mechanisms in coping language barriers among China international students.
3. To explore solutions of language barriers from China international student perspective.

Research Questions

1. How do China international students perceive their language barriers?
2. How China international student use defence mechanisms to cope with language barriers?
3. What is the suggestion from China international student to overcome the language barriers?

Method

This study used the qualitative method to get a detailed view of information and language barrier faced by China international students with a sample size of five participants that study in a public university Malaysia.

The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 30, and they are all postgraduate students in the local university, all of them are master students, the length of their stays in Malaysia are within six months to two years. All interviews took place in their university settings and transcribed into verbatim with peer review for the transcription after each interview. The researcher translated the Mandarin excerpts and got a Chinese expert to verify them after each interview that lasted about 30 minutes.

Chinese international students are allowed to express their experiences in mandarin fully, the researcher asked whether they would like to be interviewed in English or Chinese before started, if participants

prefer Chinese when interview, researcher translated their words into English after data analysis.

The researcher recorded and transcribed every interview into words and invited each participant to review and approve the transcription. Thematic analysis is use in this study to examine and identify patterns within data.

Original transcript had translated to English by the bilingual researcher, to improve the trustworthiness of the single translation result, the translated transcript is verified by a high school teacher specialized in Chinese language.

Results

Language Barriers Faced by China International Students

Theme 1: Difficulties in Academic

Participants in this study reported having problems mainly with vocabulary, writing and context understanding in their academic learning process. It is not surprising to see participants feel challenged with language. Unfamiliar words make reading more difficult, as was said by participant 1:

有的老师讲话是比较快的嘛，然后他讲得很快，像我本人听力不是很好，我就不太能跟得上，就不能完全知道他在讲什么，所以就会略过这些信息。

“Some lecturers speak smoothly, when he/she (refer to lecturer) a bit faster. Like myself, my listening skill is not very good. I can't keep up with it. I can't fully understand what he is talking about, so I skipped that information.”

China international students also facing difficulties in understanding lecture class

due to the English academic terms, like participant 5:

有，我去年二月份读第一个学期，我觉得我能听懂也只有百分之五十，还有不懂老师在讲什么，每上课就很全神贯注的想去听，因为听不懂，语言的问题，很多那种 academic 的那种词语，是完全听不懂的，或者是那种文章，journal article，读起来也是有一定的难度，所以第一学期修了一门课，language planning and policy，那一门课我只听懂百分之五十，然后是自己再去读那些文章，也会有很多问题，可能我能查出来这个单词是什么意思，但是全篇理解我还是不太懂。

“Yes, when I was in the first semester in February last year. I think I can understand only 50 per cent. I still don't understand what the teacher is talking about. Every class I try to be focus, but I can't understand. It is the language barrier, many kinds of academic terms I do not understand, or the kind of article, journal article, it is also difficult to read. In the first semester I took a course, language planning and policy, I only understand 50 per cent of that class, when I reread the articles, there will be many problems. Maybe I can find out what the word means, but I still don't understand the whole article.”

Theme 2: Poor English

Many China international students speak poor English, and they could not adapt well in real life. At the same time, most of the participants are only agree that they are only weak in speaking and listening skills. Still, they are good at writing and reading, which is the essential criteria needed to pass the test in university. Participant 1 believes that her reading capability is on par with the local students and agree that she is not strong in listening skills:

如果你讲的英文快，我会明白，但是稍微快一点，我会跟不上。

“If you speak English smoothly, I will understand. But slightly faster, I can't keep up.”

Besides that, China international students also poor in vocabulary, and this caused them language barrier in daily life, Participant 2 faced trouble due to weak vocabulary when visiting doctor:

我去医院，医院的医生是一位印度的医生，他说英语，然后医学方面会涉及到很多的专业名词，那些很专业的词，像我就不会说了。所以，和医生交流会出现一些问题。

“I went to the hospital, the doctor in the hospital is Indian, he speaks English. Then there are a lot of jargons involved in medicine, those professional words I'm not well versed. So, there are some difficulties to interact with the doctor.”

Participant 5 also expressed that she is not good in vocabulary, and this caused her to take a longer time than local students to read a journal article:

可能对本地学生来说，读一篇大概十五页的 article，可能就用一两个小时甚至更短的时间就懂什么意思了，但是对于我来说的话，词汇上是有很大的障碍的，我可能花个好几天，因为读一页就要查很多单词，focus 在词汇上你就忘记了文章的内容是什么，所以就会花费很长时间，尤其是第一学期的时候。但是现在就好了，现在词汇提高了，所以会 focus 在文章的结构上面，就会好一些。

“Maybe for local students, read an article of about fifteen pages may take an hour or even less understand what it means, but for me, there is a vocabulary limitation. I may spend several days to read a page because of the need for translation. If focus on the vocabulary, you forget what the content of the article is so that it will take a long time, especially in the first semester. But

now it's all right. Now that my vocabulary improved, I will focus more on the structure of the article.”

Theme 3: Differences in Local Accents

As has always been an ideal for many international students, standard, native-like English has excellent attractiveness. Being able to speak English like native speakers is still a goal for some of them, either consciously or unconsciously. While China international students having a hard time to overcome the Malaysian accents in English speaking, especially the ‘th’ sound, Participant 1 express that their pronunciation is different from the local students:

他的发音就是尤其是那个尾音，而且你们这边很有意思，比如说 thousand，你们会读成“dousand”，这些东西都需要去适应，像我听力本来就很烂，就会比较艰难。

“His (refer to lecturer) pronunciation, especially the ending, and local citizen is very interesting. For example, ‘thousand’, you will read “dousand”. All these things need to be adapted. Like my listening skill is already bad, it will be more difficult.”

Participant 2 also talks about her problem with the accents in communication:

比如说上次我去补衣服，补衣服的学匠跟我说他收多少钱嘛，他说是三马币，是 three。正确读音是 three 嘛，他读 tree。一直没听懂 tree 是什么意思，后来比划给我看才知道是三的意思。

“For example, the last time I went to the shop to sew my clothes, the tailor trying to tell me how much the charges, it was RM3. The correct pronunciation is ‘three’. He reads as ‘tree’. I didn't understand what the tree meant. Later, he showed the gesture to me only I know.”

Participant 5 also shared her experience that even she is speaking Mandarin to a local Chinese, but it also can be a language barrier due to differences in accents:

会有问题，就是我说话他们也听不懂，他们说话的话有一些用词我也听不太懂，可能他们听不太惯我的口音，因为虽然说得是普通话，但是跟他们平常接触的不太一样，所以他们也听不太懂我说话，我也听不太懂本地华人说话。英文的话还行，刚来的时候，英文表达能力没怎么好。

“There will be problems when they do not understand what I’m saying, and I do not understand what they are saying. They may not understand due to my accent because even though they speak Mandarin, but is not quite the same, so they do not understand, and I do not understand how the local Chinese speak. My English is fine, and just when I first arrived here, I was not very good at expressing it.”

Theme 4: Emotional State

Participants talked about the different emotions when facing language barrier in Malaysia, when they are unable to express themselves, it caused them to feel awkward, embarrassing and other negative feelings:

就那天我去看牙医，他就跟我说，就 three thirty，我就很尴尬，很不好意思地说 “tree” 是什么东西嘛，我就只能说抱歉我英语不大好，可以写给我吗。很多类似的细节，但不至于太大的困扰，只会让你尴尬。

“When I visit a dentist that day, he told me ‘three thirty’, I was very embarrassed to say what the “tree” was. I can only tell him that I’m sorry I don’t speak English well; can you write to me. A lot of similar events, but does not cause too much trouble, it just makes you feel embarrassing.”

Participant 2 felt ignored in the class:

我们是比较困扰的，有的时候他讲一个笑话嘛，然后就 get 不到他的笑点，因为我们听不懂，就是全班一起笑的时候，基本上只有中国人不笑，我们根本就听不懂。就会觉得置身事外的感觉，比较尴尬。

“It is difficult when we can’t get his (lecturer) joke because we don’t understand when the whole class is laughing, only the China international student don’t laugh. We simply do not understand, and feel like an outsider, a bit awkward.”

Negative emotion can affect China international students to perform their English skills as according to participant 5:

印象最深的时候是我刚去工作的时候，因为它是一个电子类的产品，又是全英文的，产品知识又是我不熟悉的，电子类的，所以对于我来说是很大的挑战。那段日子会觉得自己特别没有用，那一阵子心情真的很低落，其实自己的英语在日常成活中是还可以的，但当情绪很低落的时候，反而发现的英语表达能力更差了。

“The deepest impression was when I’m first time go to work, and it is the electronic industry with fully English. I’m not familiar with the product knowledge, so it was a big challenge for me. In those days, I felt useless; my mood was down for a while. My English is still okay in daily life, but when I’m in a bad mood, I found that my English presentation skill is even worse.”

Defence mechanisms to cope with language barriers

Theme 1: Denial

The self-denial of one’s feelings or previous actions is one defence mechanism to avoid damage to the ego caused by the

anxiety or guilt of accepting them. Participant 2 mentioned that when he first come to Malaysia, he thought that he is no problem at all with the language:

我觉得是，我原来以为我是没问题的，结果到了这边才发现自己英语语文这么差。

“I thought I was good (English) and later then when I’m here, I found that my English language was so bad.”

Participant 4 also pointed out that he believes his English is not that bad, but the teachers and students do not understand, some of the students will criticise his English too:

但有很多老师都对中国人，觉得我们说的不好，他就期待我们说慢一点。但是其实我的英文没有这么大的问题。

“However, there are many teachers who feel that we (China international students) are not good in English; he expects us to speak slowly. But in fact, my English does not have such a big problem.”

Theme 2: Projection

Individual may defend the ego from resulting anxieties by projecting those undesirable ideas or behaviour onto another person. Participant 1 told researcher to let her know if the researcher does not understand the Chinese term that she is talking, she projected the weak language skills to others:

其实如果你英语好的话，那些词你都很熟悉的话，其实哪一种发音你都应该大概懂什么意思。但是，尤其对英文不好的人，这是很尴尬。

“If you have good English and familiar with those words, you should understand even the pronunciation slightly changes. However, especially those who are not

good at English, this is very embarrassing.”

Participant 3 also expressed that the local students do not take the initiative to speak with her while she also only looks for them when need helps. She has projected that the local students behave the same way as her:

没有，他们也不会主动跟我们说话。我们也遇到问题的时候才找他们这样。

“No, they (other students) will not take the initiative to speak with us. We also only look for them when we encountered problems.”

Theme 3: Identification

When we try to appease a person whom we perceive to be a threat, we may emulate aspects of their behaviour. By adopting their mannerisms, repeating phrases or language patterns that they tend to use and mirroring their character traits.

Participants might adopt the social norms or attitudes of classmates or other people whom they seek acceptance from, to avoid being rejected by their new peers, Participant 4 applying this by introducing himself using the basic local language:

不会，我感觉我接触到的人大部分用英语就够了，不会为了小部分人特地去学马来语，顶多他听不懂，我会调节一下气氛，saya nama L** Y***。然后他会开心一点。但是我不会特地为了他学一门语言嘛。

*“No, I feel learning English is enough since most of the people I come in contact can speak English. I wouldn’t specifically learn Malay for a small number of people. At most, he/she couldn’t understand it, I would ease the tension ambience, ‘saya nama L** Y***’ (my name is L** Y***). Then he will be relieved, but I will not*

especially learn a language for him/her right."

Suggestion from China International Student to Overcome The Language Barriers

Theme 1: Self-study

China international students need to work harder than the local students because of the language barrier they are facing, and it is often recognised as acceptable using their first language to study when international students have great difficulty with English. As pointed out by Participant 1, some beginners can use the first language as a tool to study:

然后下课自己花时间去找相应的中文资料，去搞懂这些，因为知识点都相通。

"After class, I will take some time to find the related Chinese references; the information is related and similar."

She also does self-study like memorising words, practice listening skills or read English material before she goes to sleep. Add on to that, she also bought online English lesson to learn proper English, and the instructor is a native English speaker.

Participant 2 will force himself to adapt to the English environment:

主动地去创造英文的环境，最基本的就是把自己的手机调成英文。

"To actively create an English environment, the most basic thing is to set your phone (language) into English."

Participant 4 also expressed his ideas of creating the English environment:

我听 BBC 就是那些英文广播，我哪怕睡觉我也戴着听。基本上每个早晨都在听 30 分钟到 1 个小时，有时候是带着思

维去听，感觉那些信息，有时候就听着，晚上听着就睡着了。

"I listened to the BBC, those English broadcasts. I still listening during sleeping. Every morning I will listen for 30 minutes to 1 hour. Sometimes with active listening, absorb the information, and sometimes just simply listen and fall asleep at night."

Theme 2: Encourage Intercultural Interaction and Social Support

Participant 1 will look for support from other classmates if she encounters any problem due to the language barrier:

比如说老师不把那个 assignment post 到那个 spectrum 上面，有时候就，可能我就不知道有这个作业，又要跟华人同学去确认一下。

"For example, the lecturer did not put that assignment post on the spectrum (student portal). Sometimes, I may not know that there is this assignment, and I would seek confirmation with the Chinese classmates."

Participant 2 suggest that he will communicate with people as he believes that the more he speaks with people, the better his language will be. Besides communicating with people in the class, Participant 4 go out of the university environment to communicate with the local people:

我还有去商场买东西，你不管怎么跟他聊，比较好的销售员他都会围绕着你说的话跟你去聊，他不会中断，所以你可以去练习。

"I go to the mall to buy things, and a good attitude salesman will talk to you and stick with your topic. He will not interrupt so that you can practice."

His practice is contact lesser with the Chinese students or group with those that social with the local people with good English. He also goes to the malls and speaks lesser mandarin language, as he believes that it is not necessary for China international students to only social with the Chinese here.

Theme 3: University Support

Participant 2 would hope to have language classes that are available for all international students because the language classes that available in the university are only for those that do not pass the IELTS English test international students, and the lessons only teach academic English:

可以开设一些课程，这种义务性的课程去教中国学生去学习英文和马来语。

“(University) can set up some course that teaches China international students to learn English and Malay language.”

He also suggested the language class should be taught in slower speed, encourage more discussions and interaction between students and the lecturer, rather than only one-way communication which the lecturer teach, and student listen only.

Participant 3 is looking for more social activities at the university:

学校可以多开展一点活动，让当地人跟留学生一起，就是社团，可以一起玩的那种。

“Schools can carry out more activities that allow local people to interact with international students. The kind of society or clubs that can have fun together.”

Participant 4 is more particular with the improvement for university staff and lecturers' English skills and the local accents to be corrected:

还有一些 lecturer，口音很重的需要被训练一下，真的有些口音太重了，学术再好，但是口语不好，讲课我们就听不懂啊。

“Some lecturers, their accent is very localised and needs to be trained. Those that have heavy accents even they are knowledgeable, but the spoken language is not well versed. We cannot understand the lectures.”

Participant 5 would prefer to attend the talk and seminar organised in university, and she also encourages China international students to join those clubs' activities instead of just stick with the same group of China students:

但是（讲座会）他们会讨论一些话题是很棒的，而且就是讲座会分不同的话题，通过这种讲座，你就可以去体验，提高你的知识，可能会不懂，但是你会去探索它是什么东西。我觉得上 seminar 是提高中国学生提高外语很不错的方法。再有的话，可能是一些社团活动，就是通过有趣的活动，组织。但是不要只是中国人，因为中国人喜欢扎堆，要参加多元文化，多语言环境的，让中国人去学习。

“(Seminar) they will discuss some topics that are great, and that the talk divided into different topics, which you can experience, improve your knowledge, you might not understand, but you will explore what it is. I think that seminar is also an excellent way to enhance China students' ability to improve foreign languages. Besides, some clubs have exciting activities, but don't just be with China students, because China people like to get together, they should learn through participating in multicultural and multilingual environments.”

Discussion

In this study, the researcher will discuss types of language barriers faced by China international students, the three types of defence mechanisms used and solutions to solve the language barriers from the perspective of China international students.

Language Barriers Faced by China International Students

The researcher has divided the answers for research question one into four themes, which is difficulties in academic, poor English, differences in local accents and emotional state. Findings in this study is in line with Mei (2017) that China international students encounter language barriers in academic and social life, such as does not understand in the lecturer class, having trouble in making phone calls due to the difference in accents, the speed of the speech and the difference in pronunciation. Yassin et al. (2020) also have the similar findings where international students facing difficulties in sustainable study due to language barriers.

China international students facing difficulties in academic, they have to translate the educational content into their first language for better understanding. This finding is consistent with Liu (2016) that indicated academic achievement are greatly affected by language proficiency since students take a longer time to study in educational contents that are not their first language. Banjong (2015) also have the similar finding, if students lack of proficiency in the language of instruction in the class, they are unable to follow the lectures or doing the examination test properly, which participants in this study also comment the same thing on the speed of the lecturer affected their understanding in the class.

Emotions states of China international students also affected due to language barrier. The language barrier that causes these negative emotions including others like fears, timidity will get the situation even worse even into depression which in turn affecting academic performance too (Banjong, 2015)

Uses of Defence Mechanisms

It is sufficient to consider denial as the refusal to face specific facts, and this is when the participants deny their English is not acceptable and claimed that the lecturer makes a judgement just because he is from China. It is the standard form of denial when people receive unfavourable evaluations, and they often reject the implication rather than incorporating them into their self-concepts, making external attribution for failure (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998).

Although the fact that denial defence style categorised as immature, one of the studies in Pakistan found that medical students with higher scores on denial were protective against depression (Waqas et al., 2015), this statement agree by Bowins (2004) mentioned that minor forms of dissociation such as denial and others are not only quite common in the general population but are also highly adaptive in acute stress, which applied in this study where China international students must protect their ego from facing the negative evaluation.

Most of the participants apply projection defence mechanisms, supported by Cramer (1987) claimed that this is used most often by the middle age group, which is intermediate and early adolescent. Projection categorised as level 2 immature defences, Waqas et al. (2015) found that lower academic performance, higher depression and anxiety levels in their studies associated with an immature and neurotic defence mechanism. China

international students use projection to interpret others does not take the initiative to interact with them; they become anti-social in the classroom and may affect their emotion and academic performance. This is in line with Sumanjali et al. (2018) findings that students are unable to cope well in a situation if they are emotionally unstable.

The identification defence mechanism is not used widely by the respondents as they only admire the excellent English skills students but does not show the intention to imitate them.

Solutions

The positive result from this study is all participants are willing to self-study to improve their language proficiency. Pysarchyk and Yamshynska (2015) suggest the effectiveness to learn a foreign language significantly depends on whether the individual ready to learn as well as believe in oneself abilities to speak a foreign language.

Participants realised that intercultural interaction and improve their English speaking skills are essential, this finding is similar with Mei (2017) that implicate intercultural communication should be encourage so students can mutually better understand each other. Ability to communicate correlate to student satisfaction on academic performance as well as campus life (Baker, 2017).

Participants hope that university can provide language classes not just for academic, but also coping language barrier in daily life. This is in line with Deni et al. (2021) that suggest university can have more initiative to support international students. Al-Zubaidi and Rechards (2010) support this by suggesting language classes that the local university provided to international students are not sufficient for their needs.

Conclusion

Universities must become more aware of the barriers these China international students face and implement appropriate support services. Helping China international students to be successful requires all related departments to be active in showing their obligation in assisting China international students by engaging in related research and offering suitable services and program.

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