

# *Exploring The Role of Teacher Agency in Enhancing Classroom Interaction among Chinese International Students in Higher Education in the UK*

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**Abstract.** Using a teacher agency framework, this study examines the classroom interaction challenges faced by Chinese students in the UK higher education and analyzes the underlying causes. Employing qualitative methods, an extended literature review, and reflective thematic analysis, the research addresses the research question: How does teacher agency affect classroom interaction among Chinese students? The findings revealed that students often remained silent, participated less frequently in group activities, and had limited communication with teachers. These challenges stemmed from differences in educational philosophies, the influence of traditional culture, a weak sense of belonging, and Western centrism. This study provides teacher agency suggestions to help teachers to reflect on their beliefs and adjust their goals.

**Keywords:** teacher agency, intercultural education, international students, classroom interaction

## **1. Introduction**

Classroom interaction plays an important role in UK higher education and cultivates students' intercultural competence [1]. According to the data of Higher Education Statistics Agency [2], the number of China students studying in UK has been increasing steadily in recent years, and the number of China students reached the maximum in the 2022/23 academic year. Although the number of students in China has declined slightly since then, China students still account for a large proportion of international students in UK universities. The internationalisation of universities not only reflects the cultural diversity but also leads to the psychological problems of China students, such as difficulties in adaptation, emotional stress, decline in academic performance, anxiety and tension, caused by language barriers and cultural differences [3]. However, some studies show that UK universities have not paid enough attention to this issue. International students are usually regarded as an economic resource by universities, and they often feel marginalised. The internationalisation policy of universities is mainly limited to the enrollment of students with diverse cultural backgrounds, which is not really reflected in the change of teaching content [4,5]. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how teacher agency can promote the classroom interaction difficulties of China students in UK higher education. Based on the above discussion,

this study will focus on the following research questions: How does teacher agency affect the classroom interaction of China students?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Classroom interaction challenges of Chinese international students

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that Chinese students face many difficulties in classroom interaction within UK higher education. Empirical research indicates that Chinese students often remain silent when questioned by teachers, exhibit low participation in group assignments, have limited intercultural communication, and tend to cluster with students from their own country rather than interacting broadly with local classmates [6]. These studies have validated these findings from the perspectives of teachers, Chinese students, and local students; however, many studies have small sample sizes or are limited to specific programs, thus limiting the generalizability of their results.

While language barriers are frequently cited, the most persuasive explanations in this corpus treat language as a surface constraint that interacts with deeper mechanisms. First, educational cultural differences, notably expectations about teacher–student roles and power distance, create mismatches in what 'good participation' looks like, producing uncertainty and risk aversion in inquiry-led classrooms [7]. Second, traditional cultural norms such as face-work and harmony, intensified by culture shock, encourage protective silence when students fear error, conflict, or public loss of competence [3]. Third, belonging within the classroom 'community of practice' emerges as a critical mediator, even students with strong English remain quiet when they feel marginalised or positioned as peripheral to native-speaker groups [8]. Finally, critiques of western pedagogic ethnocentrism argue that taken-for-granted norms, verbal assertiveness, rapid debate, and a narrow rendering of 'criticality', can pathologise alternative participation styles and sustain exclusionary interactional orders [4].

Previous studies reframe interactional difficulty as a relational and institutional problem rather than a simple linguistic deficit. Read through the lens of teacher agency, the implications are concrete, instructors should diagnose students' prior educational experiences and participation norms, render local rules of engagement explicit, scaffold low-risk entry points to talk, design groupwork that redistributes participation and accountability, cultivate belonging through intentional grouping and responsive feedback, and interrogate the normative assumptions embedded in assessment and participation rubrics.

### 2.2. Teacher and university responses

Studies centred on 'classroom silence' recommend moves that (a) diagnose and normalise culturally-shaped participation norms, (b) render expectations explicit, and (c) re-design participation opportunities. Drawing on intercultural education pedagogy, Wu [9] argues that instructors should plan around students' interests and prior educational experiences, clarify task criteria and role division in group work, provide timely formative feedback, and embed culturally relevant materials to bolster belonging. Wang, Moskal, and Schweisfurth [10] warn against pathologizing silence from the perspectives of social practice and agency; rather, they advocate a proactive approach to rules of participation, viewing reflection time as legitimate participation, and encouraging teachers to actively build bridges to foster a sense of collective identity. From the perspective of the politics of knowledge, Zhou, Nok, and Sakamoto [11] emphasize affirming teacher responses, positioning

culture as knowledge that needs to be communicated, and questioning the value of western-centric norms of participation. Methodologically, these studies are small-scale and often student-oriented, but they focus on practical repertoire, transparency of expectations, low-risk entry points, examples of cultural reactivity, and feedback that distinguishes language competence from cognitive contributions.

The second strand foregrounds institutional conditions that scaffold agency. Little et al [12]. show that targeted staff development, framed through teachers' cultural biographies and peer dialogue, builds reflexivity and intercultural sensitivity, especially when communities of practice are resourced. Through multi-institution action research, Leask [5] offers an operational Internationalisation of the Curriculum process (review, imagine, revise, act, and evaluate), but stresses that policy statements must be backed by funding, workload recognition, promotion criteria, and cross-disciplinary platforms. From a reflexive narrative, Keegan [13] documents how institutional permission and encouragement experiment with curriculum (e.g., intercultural readings, multilingual moments, structured mixed grouping) catalyse wider staff uptake. Together, such studies map the ecology of support, training, evaluation frameworks, curriculum reform grants, and collegial spaces, that converts individual teacher intentions into sustained practice.

### 3. Theoretical framework

This study uses the Ecological Approach to Teacher Agency [14] to explain and guide teacher responses to classroom interaction challenges among Chinese international students in the UK higher education. In the view of Priestley et al. [14], agency is not a fixed personal trait but an emergent, situated achievement produced at the intersection of teachers' histories, their future-oriented goals, and the affordances and constraints of the institutional environment. This study applies this theory through three interconnected dimensions: iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions. To make the model operable, this study takes an ecological perspective and determines critical reflection on actions as the key to strengthen initiative, so that teachers can adjust interaction according to the actual situation and question and reflect on the participation rules of western-centered classroom interaction.

The perspective of ecology is applicable to the international classroom ecosystem in UK universities, because this issue is intercultural in nature. This needs to consider several aspects: due to the different educational and cultural traditions and power distance between China and the West, educators have different expectations for students' participation. UK educators prefer students to actively participate in the classroom, while China students prefer to be a listener, which is what they are used to. Second, the change of sense of belonging within the scope of practice has affected students' willingness to interact. Even if their language ability is sufficient, students may be reluctant to interact because of their lack of sense of belonging. Third, institutional policies that may promote or inhibit teachers' initiative in universities, such as the evaluation system of schools. Within this framework, the university, as a part of the ecosystem, should promote the individual's willingness to interact into continuous practice, rather than just acting as an external environment.

From the perspective of classroom practice, teacher agency has four forms of expression. Firstly, teachers design classroom content suitable for China students' cultural background and constantly increase the frequency of interaction. Secondly, teachers can clearly convey the rules and evaluation criteria of classroom participation before the class begins, which is a more acceptable way for China students. The third is to use examples and classroom materials related to students' cultural background in teaching. The last method is to provide teachers' feedback for students and distinguish oral expression from knowledge contribution. At the same time, some factors that can

play a role but are limited include university system, teacher evaluation mechanism, class size and curriculum, career development opportunities and peer network. Finally, this study summarizes these findings into two levels: the changes in classroom interaction and the performance of teachers' initiative.

From an analytical point of view, this framework puts forward three core viewpoints closely related to the research problem. First, when university resources are consistent with teachers' educational goals, teachers' autonomy increases and classroom interaction becomes fairer. Second, when this consistency is weak, teachers' temporary decision-making becomes particularly important; It can reconcile the contradiction between teachers' practical constraints and practical actions, thus promoting the redesign and adjustment of the system, while avoiding treating students' silence as a negative behavior. Finally, when teachers help students build a sense of belonging through teaching and provide a clear and transparent framework for classroom participation, their role is often the most obvious. This combination also provides a more coherent training of thought for understanding relevant literature and putting forward practical suggestions.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research design

This study adopts the paradigm of constructivism and interpretivism and uses qualitative research methods. Teachers build intercultural classrooms by designing teaching contents, while students cultivate these abilities through classroom interaction. Students' different cultural backgrounds and personal experiences lead to their different understanding of classroom interaction, and students construct knowledge in the classroom. Therefore, the philosophical position of this study is constructivism and interpretivism. To solve this philosophical standpoint and research problem, this study adopts qualitative research methods. According to the research of Priestley et al. [14], teacher agency is influenced by environment, system and teachers' personal beliefs and experiences. Therefore, this study will adopt the data collection method based on literature review, use strict inclusion and exclusion standard sampling, and conduct reflective thematic analysis to analyze the data.

### 4.2. Sampling strategy

In this study, literature retrieval was conducted based on keywords such as "international students in China", "classroom interaction", "teacher agency" and "silence". Due to the large number of documents presented after the initial large-scale search, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were established in this study. Inclusion criteria include that core documents should be written in English and relevant to teachers and international students in higher education in the past decade. Exclusion criteria include primary and secondary school teachers, non-international educational environment, non-English literature, literature that only provides abstracts and literature with low credibility. Although articles have been selected according to these standards, some documents may be different from the purpose of this study and should be read and used critically.

### 4.3. Data collection

Based on these standards, this study uses the literature review method to evaluate, summarize and criticize existing literature, determine the conclusions and gaps, and integrate key viewpoints and theoretical resources [15]. Although many literature reviews only list descriptive information,

lacking in-depth analysis and theoretical innovation after collecting empirical data [15], this study summarizes the difficulties, causes and solutions of classroom interaction of foreign students in China from the existing literature, finds out the theoretical gaps and limitations, and analyzes the application and limitations of teacher agency in this context. Literature research mainly focuses on Google Scholar, Glasgow University Library, Taylor and Francis Online, Scientific Guidance and ERIC.

#### 4.4. Data analysis

In this study, the six-stage framework outlined by Braun and Clarke [16] was used to examine the data by means of reflective thematic analysis (RTA). RTA emphasizes the positive role of researchers' own reflection in interpreting research data and generating themes [16]. Although RTA is mainly used for quantitative data analysis, its analysis principle can be extended to literature-based research, in which the core literature selected by inclusion and exclusion criteria is used to form a data set.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study employs reflective thematic analysis, combined with an ecological perspective centred on teacher subjectivity, to redefine the difficulties Chinese students encounter in classroom interactions in the UK higher education as ecological challenges rather than merely language issues. The research evidence reveals three observable patterns: international students in China often remain silent about teachers' questions, their participation in group tasks is low, and intercultural communication with local classmates and teachers is limited. Although language barriers are mentioned in many cases, they are only superficial limitations. The influence of other cultural backgrounds is not limited to the language itself, but also related to some deeper mechanisms, such as the differences in understanding the norms of classroom participation in different educational cultures, the changes in students' sense of belonging in the classroom community, and the institutional arrangements that emphasize students' quick response and open and confident expression. Therefore, to effectively respond to these problems, teachers' teaching methods and contents also need to be adjusted accordingly, which is also inseparable from the support and guarantee at the university level.

Literature agrees that the difficulties in interaction are caused by a series of factors. First of all, the differences between Chinese and western educational cultures, especially the definition of power distance and "good participation", have produced the expectation gap in the dialogue class based on inquiry. China students who have been educated for a long time in a teacher-centred environment may interpret frequent questions or spontaneous discussions as assessing risks rather than inviting them to build knowledge together. They will worry about the risk of giving the wrong answer. Second, when the perceived cost of public mistakes or conflicts is high, cultural logic strengthened by cultural shock, such as face engineering and harmony, makes "protective silence" a rational choice. Third, the classroom community that belongs to practice will adjust the willingness to speak. Even among students with strong English ability, marginal positioning will inhibit participation. Finally, the western-centred participation rules embedded in the evaluation and time structure will misunderstand students' other alternative participation styles as "low participation" and only recognise students' positive interaction with teachers in class. Teachers confuse the speed of answering with students' confidence and criticism and whether they understand the content. It is

worth noting that these factors have found problems in the relationship and structure, that is, how to invite, recognize and reward participation, rather than personal lack of confidence or ability.

The analysis specifies how UK higher education teachers can mobilise agency across the iterative, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions. Along the iterative dimension, teachers interrogate their own educational socialisation and tacit beliefs that equate talk with learning, shifting from deficit framings of silence to curiosity about its multiple meanings. Along the projective dimension, teachers articulate inclusive, dialogic participation and intercultural competence as explicit curricular aims and redesign courses accordingly, positioning belonging as an outcome alongside disciplinary learning. Along the practical-evaluative dimension, aims are translated into low-risk entry points and explicit norms, structured turn-taking and role rotation to redistribute talk, 'think, pair, share' and short written 'warm-ups' to lower the social cost of first contributions, transparent criteria for participation and group tasks, culturally responsive examples that enable students to draw on prior knowledge, and feedback practices that distinguish language form from epistemic contribution. Belonging building is embedded in routine practice through intentional grouping, peer scaffolding, and affirming responses that validate diverse participation routes. Critical reflection helps teachers fine-tune interactional routines and interrogate participation rubrics that privilege speed and assertiveness over quality of reasoning.

Teacher agency is contingent on institutional affordances. Staff development that engages teachers' cultural biographies and peer dialogue can cultivate reflexivity and intercultural sensitivity, especially when embedded in communities of practice. Operational processes for curriculum internationalisation move policy aspirations into routine practice, but require workload recognition, small grants for pedagogic innovation, promotion and appraisal criteria that value inclusive participation work, and cross-disciplinary platforms for exchange and co-design. Where such conditions are weak or merely symbolic, individual agency is diluted, and gains remain idiosyncratic. Where they are present and aligned, projective aims are more likely to crystallise into durable classroom change.

This study puts forward three key points. First of all, when university-level support can be consistent with teachers' professional goals in terms of time, resources and recognition, teachers' agency is more likely to be brought into play and classroom interaction is more likely to become fair. This consistency can make the scattered adjustment of teachers gradually develop into a more stable teaching practice. Secondly, under the condition of limited institutional support, critical reflection still plays an important role, because it can help teachers to re-examine classroom practice, rather than simply understanding students' silence as students' personal problems. In this case, those small-scale adjustments that meet the specific teaching situation, have low cost and can be gradually promoted are usually more practical. Thirdly, it is not enough to rely on a single approach if the classroom really wants to shift from "reducing silence" to "promoting more meaningful participation". In contrast, it is more likely to promote continuous classroom participation by combining the cultivation of a sense of belonging with a clear and clear participation framework.

Essentially, this study attempts to integrate the scattered findings in the existing literature into a relatively coherent ecological perspective. This perspective is not only helpful to explain the difficulties and reasons faced by China students in UK higher education classroom interaction, but also helpful to further analyse which response paths are more feasible in practice. In terms of methods, this study takes a teacher-centred analysis perspective, links the identification and interpretation of problems with the adjustment of teaching practice and institutional support at the

university level, and emphasizes the interaction between observable classroom practice and broader institutional conditions.

On the practical level, this study points out that the low threshold and practical solutions are mainly reflected in several aspects: first, teachers should define the requirements and evaluation expectations of classroom participation more clearly; Secondly, a low-risk participation mode should be established through instructional design to reduce the pressure on students to speak publicly; Third, the teaching content and teaching methods need to fully consider students' cultural background and existing learning experience; Fourthly, teachers should pay attention to distinguish between language fluency and knowledge contribution in the feedback process, so as to avoid equating simplicity of expression with learning quality. In addition, universities need to provide continuous institutional support to create necessary conditions for relevant teaching adjustments.

From a broader perspective, the key to solving the difficulty of classroom interaction is not only to reduce the superficial silence, but to redesign the classroom ecology and the organisational environment on which it depends, so that different forms of participation can become acceptable, low-risk and practical classroom practice. At the same time, this process also means that universities need to provide enough institutional space, practical opportunities and professional incentives for teachers, so that they can continue to carry out inclusive teaching adjustments and gradually develop them into stable classroom practice.

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