

**Exploring Chinese international students' intercultural
competence in Australian classrooms**

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requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Statement of originality

I hereby certify that this thesis represents my own original work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, toward the fulfilment of any other academic qualification. To the best of my knowledge, all ideas and intellectual contributions in this thesis are my own, except where the work of others has been explicitly acknowledged and referenced. Any assistance I received during the preparation of this thesis has been acknowledged.

September 30, 2025

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Signature

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Generative AI statement

The author acknowledges the use of ChatGPT 5 (<https://chatgpt.com>) during the preparation of this thesis solely for proofread purposes, including paraphrasing, improving sentence flow, correcting grammar and spelling, and enhancing overall readability. All AI-generated suggestions were carefully reviewed and, where necessary, revised to ensure accuracy, appropriateness, and alignment with the research context. The author affirms full responsibility for the final content and confirms that the use of generative AI was limited to proofread support and complied with the relevant academic integrity requirements.

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Abstract

With the increasing number of Chinese international students (CIS) in Australian universities, intercultural competence has become a critical factor influencing their interactions with Australian tutors in classrooms. Existing research often examines students' intercultural competence from a single-method or single-perspective approach, typically focusing on students. This study explores CISs' intercultural competence in classroom interactions through a mixed-methods design that incorporates dual perspectives from both students and tutors. Guided by the widely recognised three-factors framework of intercultural competence, affective, knowledge, and behavioural competences, this research identifies the key challenges influencing competence development. Compared with previous research, this study emphasises both the challenges and opportunities in CISs' intercultural competence development, examining the process from both students' and tutors' perspectives. Adopting a cyclical lens, it interprets how the three interrelated intercultural competence factors interact in Australian multicultural classrooms. This approach provides a shared reference point for facilitating CISs' intercultural competence in Australian classrooms. The three questions to be answered regarding key constructs of intercultural competence factors are: (1) What are the affective factors influencing CISs in the development of their intercultural competence? Why? (2) What are the knowledge factors influencing CISs in the development of their intercultural competence? Why? (3) What are the behavioural factors influencing CISs in the development of their intercultural competence? Why? A total of 328 CISs participated in the survey. 21 CISs and 17 Australian tutors participated in semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis, and qualitative data were analysed by thematic analysis.

The main argument of this thesis is that enhancing the intercultural competence of CISs is both paradoxical and gradual. It is a continuous, cyclical process of negotiation among affective, knowledge and behavioural factors, in which Australian

tutors play a crucial auxiliary role. Growth is inherently contradictory, involving both progress and setbacks, where challenges can also be reframed as opportunities.

The findings reveal both challenges and potential opportunities for CISs. They highlight key factors that influence CISs' development of intercultural competence within the developmental framework. To maximise their intercultural competence development, CISs need to view intercultural growth as a co-constructed space shaped through the friction and negotiation that occur in classroom interactions. They must also recognise and make use of their own strengths. Australian tutors play a crucial auxiliary role by helping students mitigate and address challenges, while also leveraging the positive aspects of these challenges to mobilise CISs' subjective initiative and facilitating meaningful cycles of intercultural competence development.

The findings of this study make significant contributions to both understanding CISs' development of intercultural competence and the context of higher education classrooms. Theoretically, this study enriches the concept of how intercultural competence has influenced in creating effective and appropriate multicultural classrooms. It also responds to the recent focus and debates surrounding the role of language capacity in intercultural competence and offers insights for future research. Practically, the findings help CISs gain self-awareness and critical thinking skills, and assist Australian tutors in understanding their students and their duties to help students in the development of intercultural competence in Australian classrooms. The findings also provide institutions with a valuable reference for guiding CISs and educators on how to operate effective learning and teaching with multicultural classroom environments.

Acknowledgement

Pursuing a PhD has been more than just a journey of training research experiences and developing critical thinking skills. It has also been an unforgettable process of self-reflexivity. As a Chinese international student, writing this thesis has constantly pushed me to think about my cultural background and my identity.

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I believe this is not the end, but rather the beginning of a new chapter in my journey of learning, teaching, and research.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Statement of originality..... | i |
| Generative AI statement..... | ii |
| Abstract..... | iii |
| Acknowledgement | v |
| Table of Contents | vii |
| List of tables..... | xi |
| List of figures..... | xii |
| List of charts | xii |
| Chapter 1 Introduction..... | 1 |
| 1.1 Introduction..... | 1 |
| 1.2 Research background | 2 |
| 1.2.1 Global state of intercultural competence | 2 |
| 1.2.2 The current state of intercultural education in China..... | 4 |
| 1.2.3 The Australian intercultural education environment..... | 6 |
| 1.3 Key constructs of intercultural competence..... | 7 |
| 1.4 Research rationale and gaps | 10 |
| 1.4.1 Rationale of this study | 10 |
| 1.4.2 Research gaps..... | 14 |
| 1.5 Research objectives..... | 18 |
| 1.6 Significance..... | 19 |
| 1.6.1 Theoretical significance | 21 |
| 1.6.2 Practical significance | 23 |
| 1.7 Structure of the thesis..... | 24 |
| Chapter 2 Literature review and theoretical framework..... | 27 |
| 2.1 Introduction..... | 27 |
| 2.2. Literature on intercultural competence | 27 |
| 2.2.1 Key conceptualisations of intercultural competence | 27 |
| 2.2.1 Intercultural competence models | 33 |
| 2.3 Factors of intercultural competence and previous studies | 45 |
| 2.3.1 Affective factors | 45 |
| 2.3.2 Knowledge factors | 49 |
| 2.3.3 Behaviour factors | 54 |
| 2.4 Conceptual framework of this study and research questions..... | 62 |
| 2.5 Summary | 68 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Chapter 3 Methodology | 70 |
| 3.1 Introduction..... | 70 |
| 3.2 Research design | 71 |
| 3.2.1 Research Steps | 72 |
| 3.2.2 Integration and research flow..... | 75 |
| 3.3 Instruments of this study..... | 76 |
| 3.4 Data collection | 79 |
| 3.4.1 Participants..... | 80 |
| 3.4.2 Quantitative data collection | 81 |
| 3.4.3 Valid responses of the research | 81 |
| 3.4.3 Qualitative data collection | 82 |
| 3.4.4 Demographic profile of Chinese international students..... | 84 |
| 3.5 Data analysis | 88 |
| 3.5.1 Quantitative data analysis | 89 |
| 3.5.2 Reliability and validity..... | 90 |
| 3.5.3 Qualitative data analysis | 102 |
| 3.6 Ethical considerations | 104 |
| 3.7 Summary of the chapter | 106 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Chapter 4 Affective factors of Chinese international students’ intercultural competence..... | 108 |
| 4.1 Introduction..... | 108 |
| 4.2 Findings from the survey | 109 |
| 4.2.1 Attitude..... | 109 |
| 4.2.2 Proactiveness..... | 110 |
| 4.2.3 Empathy | 111 |
| 4.2.4 Affective adaptation | 112 |
| 4.3 Findings from interviews | 113 |
| 4.3.1 Attitudes | 113 |
| 4.3.2 Proactiveness..... | 118 |
| 4.3.3 Affective factors in empathy | 132 |
| 4.3.4 Affective adaptation | 141 |
| 4.4 Summary and concluding marks..... | 152 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Chapter 5 Knowledge factors of Chinese international students’ intercultural competence..... | 156 |
| 5.1 Introduction..... | 156 |
| 5.2 Findings from the survey | 158 |
| 5.2.1 Communication awareness | 159 |
| 5.2.2 English language capacity..... | 160 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 5.2.3 Cultural differences | 160 |
| 5.3 Findings from interviews | 161 |
| 5.3.1 Communication awareness | 162 |
| 5.3.2 English language capacity | 168 |
| 5.3.3 Cultural difference | 185 |
| 5.4 Summary and concluding marks..... | 192 |
| | |
| Chapter 6 Behaviour factors of Chinese international students' intercultural competence..... | 196 |
| 6.1 Introduction..... | 196 |
| 6.2 Findings from the survey | 197 |
| 6.2.1 Language use | 198 |
| 6.2.2 Behaviour norms | 198 |
| 6.2.3 Communicative sensitivity..... | 199 |
| 6.2.4 Flexibility | 199 |
| 6.3 Findings from interview data | 201 |
| 6.3.1 English language use..... | 201 |
| 6.3.2 Behaviour norms | 208 |
| 6.3.3 Communicative sensitivity..... | 214 |
| 6.3.4 Flexibility | 220 |
| 6.4 Summary and concluding marks..... | 226 |
| | |
| Chapter 7 Discussion | 230 |
| 7.1 Introduction..... | 230 |
| 7.2 Recapitulation and discussion of findings | 231 |
| 7.2.1 Affective factors | 231 |
| 7.2.2 Knowledge factors | 240 |
| 7.2.3 Behaviour factors | 249 |
| 7.3 Theoretical implications..... | 259 |
| 7.4 Practical implications..... | 264 |
| 7.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research | 268 |
| 7.5.1 Limitations | 269 |
| 7.5.2 Recommendations for future research | 271 |
| | |
| References | 274 |
| Appendix A: Student survey | 290 |
| Appendix B: Chinese international students interview protocol..... | 294 |
| Appendix C: Australian tutor interview protocol..... | 296 |
| Appendix D: Ethics approval letter | 299 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Appendix E: Conference presentations during candidature | 301 |
| Appendix F: Chinese international students' participants in interview | 302 |
| Appendix G: Australian tutor participants in interview | 302 |

List of tables

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 2.1 Definitions of intercultural competence..... | 28 |
| Table 2.2 Models of intercultural competence..... | 35 |
| Table 2.3 Sub-research questions | 65 |
| Table 3.1 Total number of questionnaires and valid responses..... | 82 |
| Table 3.2 Gender distribution | 84 |
| Table 3.3 Age distribution | 85 |
| Table 3.4 Current study distribution | 85 |
| Table 3.5 Language distribution | 88 |
| Table 3.6 Overall reliability of the scale | 90 |
| Table 3.7 Reliability retesting for three factors..... | 90 |
| Table 3.8 KMO and Bartlett's Test for affective part..... | 92 |
| Table 3.9 KMO and Bartlett's Test for knowledge part..... | 92 |
| Table 3.10 KMO and Bartlett's Test for behaviour part..... | 92 |
| Table 3.11 Variance explained and eigenvalues for affective part..... | 93 |
| Table 3.12 EFA of affective factor after the first rotation | 94 |
| Table 3.13 EFA of affective factor after the second rotation | 96 |
| Table 3.14 Variance explained and eigenvalues for knowledge part | 97 |
| Table 3.15 EFA of knowledge factor after the first rotation | 98 |
| Table 3.16 EFA of knowledge factor after the second rotation..... | 98 |
| Table 3.17 Variance explained and eigenvalues for behaviour part..... | 99 |
| Table 3.18 EFA of behaviour factor after the first rotation | 100 |
| Table 3.19 EFA of behaviour factor after the second rotation | 101 |
| Table 3.20 Overall intercultural competence | 106 |
| Table 4.1 Chinese international students' affective factors | 109 |
| Table 5.1 Chinese international students' knowledge factors | 158 |
| Table 6.1 Chinese international students' behavioural factors | 198 |
| Table 7.1: Contributions to the development of intercultural competence | 262 |

List of figures

Figure 2.1 Bennett Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986)36
Figure 2.2 Chen and Starosta’s model (1996).....37
Figure 2.3 Byram’s model (1997)38
Figure 2.4 Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006).....41
Figure 3.1 Research steps 73

List of charts

Chart 3.1 Academic discipline distribution86

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalisation, intercultural competence has increasingly been recognised as an essential capability in higher education, where it is regarded as a crucial asset for effective communication in international classrooms and a key 21st-century skill (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Deardorff (2008) defines intercultural competence as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 133). For higher education, particularly in increasingly multicultural and internationalised environments, fostering intercultural competence is not about transferring pre-packaged knowledge, but about cultivating students’ capacities to critically deal with differences. The goal is not homogenisation but engagement: to enable stakeholders to recognise and reconcile diverse worldviews, interact with empathy, and act with appropriate behaviours. From an intercultural perspective, interculturality is co-constructed in real-life contexts, a process that may incorporate elements from participants’ existing cultural backgrounds as well as newly created elements (Kecskes, 2014).

In recent years, the number of Chinese international students has grown rapidly. There were 188,347 Chinese international students enrolled in Australia by August 2024, accounting for 22% of the total international student population (Department of Education, Australia, 2024). Chinese international students in Australia experience a wide range of challenges, including intercultural interactions on a daily basis, particularly within classroom settings. In these settings, their intercultural competence directly influences their interactions with Australian tutors and the overall effectiveness of classroom engagement (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Lin, 2006).

This thesis explores the intercultural competence of Chinese international students in classrooms through their interactions with Australian tutors. It examines how different factors have influenced their intercultural competence development. Drawing on both positivist and interpretivist perspectives, this study employs a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative surveys are administered to Chinese international students to assess their current intercultural competence through scenarios of interactions in Australian classrooms and to identify challenges they face. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with both Chinese international students and Australian tutors. The purpose was to gain in-depth insights from both perspectives on Chinese international students' intercultural competence, its influence on classroom interactions, and the strategies used to support intercultural competence development.

1.2 Research background

1.2.1 Global state of intercultural competence

Globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education have made intercultural competence a central focus for universities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) noted in 2013 that globalisation has intensified cultural contact. This trend makes intercultural competence an essential skill in the modern world. A decade later, UNESCO (2023) reaffirmed the practical importance of this competence. It emphasised that it combines the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for effective and appropriate interaction in diverse cultural settings. Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith (2017) cite the *Nelson Declaration on the Future of International Higher Education*, stating that intercultural competence is a vehicle of internationalisation in higher education. Within the broader trends of globalisation and educational internationalisation, intercultural education is considered a key method for developing globally competitive individuals (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

Intercultural competence research is a complex and rich concept, as reflected in the early basic definitions and models of intercultural competence. The study of intercultural competence in Western countries started early and has focused on business, diplomacy and study abroad (Deardorff, 2009; Schauer, 2024). This reflects the importance attached to interculturalism in the academic field and the great need for intercultural competence training and theoretical enhancement in a multicultural era.

Higher education institutions have become key players in developing students' intercultural competence. This role of intercultural competence has grown in importance, especially with the increasing number of international students including Chinese students who have experienced a different educational system to Western contexts. In response, many universities globally, including those in China and Australia, have integrated intercultural competence development into their internationalisation strategies. They widely view intercultural competence as crucial for students to integrate into different cultures.

However, Gregersen-Hermans (2017) found that the internationalisation process in global universities does not automatically lead to intercultural competence for international students. The internationalisation of higher education has also faced criticism. It is often criticised for focusing on outputs rather than outcomes. Gregersen-Hermans argues that international higher education might only provide a diverse environment for transnational students. It is assumed that this environment will enhance their intercultural skills, but this does not always result in actual intercultural learning. In other words, Chinese international students may have transformative cross-cultural experiences in the classroom, but, according to Bennett (2023), these encounters may not be genuine intercultural experiences.

Although intercultural development is valued worldwide, the construct of intercultural competence remains diverse (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017;

Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). This conceptual diversity creates a challenge. It hinders universities from developing effective strategies to enhance students' intercultural skills. As a result, there is a growing call for a new approach. This approach requires an evidence-based and clearly articulated framework for developing intercultural competence (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017).

Similarly, Félix-Brasdefer (2025) examines the idea of a qualified global citizen for today's society. He approaches this concept through the lens of intercultural competence and argues that an interculturally competent person can interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures. They achieve goals through their attitudes, knowledge and behaviours.

However, the ability of global higher education systems to cultivate this competence varies greatly in practice. This variation is due to differences in educational philosophies, policy priorities and teaching methods. These differences are particularly evident when comparing China and Australia. Their distinct educational systems and frameworks lead to different approaches and outcomes in developing students' intercultural competences.

1.2.2 The current state of intercultural education in China

Chinese international students typically receive limited intercultural education before coming to Australia, as significant gaps remain in the development of intercultural competence within China's higher education system.

At the macro level, Xu (2011) pointed out as early as 2011 that much of China's approach to intercultural competence development heavily borrows from Western models, with local resources for cultivating such skills remaining severely inadequate. Zhang (2012) further noted the absence of clear and systematic strategies for intercultural competence development in Chinese higher education. Although the Chinese Society of Higher Education Research Centre (2024) recently called for greater internationalisation as a means to enhance educational quality and as a long-

term national strategy, these initiatives remain largely rhetorical, with little direct emphasis on the cultivation of intercultural competence—the very foundation for meaningful global engagement.

At the micro level, many factors constrain students' development of intercultural competence. Chinese universities continue to face numerous challenges in implementing intercultural education. Teaching methods are generally uniform, curricula lack targeted intercultural content, faculty often have limited training in intercultural pedagogy, and resources dedicated to intercultural competence remain scarce (Mu & Yu, 2021).

A further limitation is that the development of intercultural competence in China is still predominantly embedded within English language courses, with few opportunities for authentic intercultural practice. Liao et al. (2025), in a recent study on Chinese university students, observed that curriculum design for Chinese–Western cultural comparison is often neglected or underdeveloped in China, leaving students with low intercultural awareness. Even the few English courses that expose students to Western culture tend to focus narrowly on reading and writing skills, neglecting the speaking and listening training essential for interactive competence. Moreover, Chinese students show relatively weak abilities in intercultural communication, understanding, and appreciation; English classes also provide limited intercultural practice, insufficient language input, and rigid teaching formats. These realities expose the inadequacy of English instruction as a vehicle for intercultural education in Chinese universities.

The development of Chinese students' intercultural competence is, without question, mediated by their cultural background. The traditional classroom in China typically emphasises teacher authority and student passivity, an approach rooted in Confucian values and a collectivist orientation (Hofstede, 2001). Teachers themselves, products of this cultural tradition, often perpetuate the focus on authority and knowledge transmission, with little regard for fostering intercultural competence

(Liang & Matthews, 2023). This cultural legacy limits opportunities for student expression and interaction, resulting in inadequate training for intercultural engagement and adaptation.

While Chinese higher education is gradually moving towards greater internationalisation, there remains substantial room for improvement in advancing students' intercultural competence, particularly for those preparing to study overseas. A deeper understanding of this educational background is crucial to supporting Chinese international students' academic adjustment and cultural integration in Australia.

1.2.3 The Australian intercultural education environment

In contrast to China, Australia has developed a markedly different approach to intercultural education, treating the cultivation of intercultural competence as a national priority. The Australian Strategy for International Education 2021–2030 (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021) explicitly identifies intercultural competence as a core goal. Furthermore, the Australian Curriculum includes “intercultural competence” as one of the key general capabilities for students, aiming to develop global perspectives and effective intercultural communication skills (McCandless et al., 2020). These strategies are not only evident at the policy level but also deeply inform institutional practices, providing a strong foundation for the development of Chinese international students' intercultural competence.

Unlike Chinese universities, which tend to rely on English courses with limited real-world practice (Mu & Yu, 2021; Liao et al., 2025), Australian universities typically offer dedicated intercultural communication courses and a range of support services. These include language partner programs, cultural exchange initiatives, and counselling for psychological and social adjustment (Pham & Tran, 2015). Such practical measures provide Chinese international students with greater opportunities

for meaningful interaction and cultural experience, promoting the development of both their intercultural competence and language skills.

However, despite Australia's long history in intercultural education, a number of practical challenges remain. Similar to Gregersen-Hermans's (2017) perspective, the university is seen as a hub that provides international students with a multicultural environment rather than as a place that facilitates intercultural competence. Marangell et al. (2024) point out that current practices often overemphasise theoretical knowledge, while offering insufficient personalised support for students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, teachers frequently lack structured training, guidance, and resources for supporting students' intercultural competence, which limits the overall effectiveness of such education. Therefore, while Australia's intercultural education environment offers clear advantages at both the policy and practice levels in helping Chinese international students develop intercultural competence, further efforts are needed to provide targeted services and build teacher capacity to achieve deeper and more sustainable intercultural integration.

With the continued growth of the international student population in Australia, and the increasing attention these students receive in the Australian higher education system, the internationalisation of tertiary education has become an increasingly prominent trend. The ongoing encounter of diverse cultures within educational contexts continually challenges established pedagogical practices in Australian universities (Arkoudis & Marangell, 2023). Against this backdrop, research into how to enhance Chinese international students' intercultural competence, and, more specifically, how they negotiate their integration into classrooms that differ markedly from those in their home country, has gained considerable significance. Within the classroom context, the intercultural competence of Chinese international students plays a pivotal role in determining whether they can successfully transform the challenges they encounter into opportunities for growth.

1.3 Key constructs of intercultural competence

Recent research shows that intercultural competence in international higher education has gained increasing attention and is moving toward practical application (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). This shift prompts reflection on how individuals practise intercultural competence. The factors commonly associated with intercultural competence include affective, attitude, awareness, cognitive, skills, behavioural, and outcomes (Byram, 2021; Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2000; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Fantini, 2007). Some of these factors are core constructs for the practice of intercultural competence in higher education classrooms. These constructs are essential for understanding study abroad not only as an experience but also as a developmental process from an intercultural perspective (Félix-Brasdefer, 2025).

Deardorff (2006, 2009) conceptualises the development of intercultural competence as four main cyclical processes: attitude, knowledge, internal outcomes, and external outcomes. Chen and Starosta (1996) conceptualise intercultural competence as three factors: affective, cognitive, and behavioural. Byram (1997) conceptualises intercultural competence as skills, knowledge, attitude, and awareness.

This study adapts Deardorff's (2006) conceptualisation of intercultural competence. It also incorporates components from the frameworks of Byram (1997), Chen and Starosta (1996), and Fantini (2007). The study focuses on three factors: affective, knowledge, and behavioural. Other components are merged into these three factors. For example, attitude is incorporated into the affective factor, and skills are incorporated into the behavioural factor. Specifically, the study examines the concept of the affective factor and its role in enhancing Chinese international students' intercultural competence. Second, it investigates the knowledge factor, with particular attention to students' awareness, linguistic resources, and understanding of classroom differences. Finally, it explores students' behaviours in classroom interactions. This includes how they respond to classroom engagement, differences in language use, and differences in behavioural norms. It also considers their ability to detect behavioural differences and their flexibility in responding to such differences.

The affective factor is the starting point for the development of intercultural competence among Chinese international students. It includes attitudes toward different cultures, sense of proactiveness, respect, and empathy. Chen and Starosta (1996, 2000) describe this as the ability to recognise and appreciate cultural differences in both behaviour and perspective. Deardorff (2006, 2009) also argues that behaviour and attitude influence each other. In other words, without a positive attitude, an active willingness to integrate, and empathy toward cultural differences, students cannot fully mobilise their knowledge or produce effective and appropriate behaviours in intercultural classroom interactions (Deardorff, 2006).

Knowledge in intercultural competence refers to an individual's awareness and the ability to draw on resources. It involves understanding the values, norms, and interaction styles of other cultures. Chen and Starosta (1996, 2000) describe this as the process of coming to know both one's own culture and other cultures. Byram (1997, 2021) similarly emphasises knowledge of others and of self, including linguistic skills, as a key *savoir* ("skills to know") for intercultural competence. Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith (2017) and López-Rocha (2016) argue that cultural knowledge is a crucial component of intercultural competence and a key influence on the effectiveness of interactions. As scholars have noted, a shared understanding exists among intercultural competence researchers. This understanding is formed by the integration of awareness, language, and cultural knowledge, along with the complementary relationship between them.

Behaviour is the key to producing appropriate and effective outcomes from knowledge (Deardorff, 2006, 2009; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Chen and Starosta (1996) argue that effective behaviour is the ability to accomplish tasks and achieve communication goals in intercultural interactions. In reality, this means that individuals must adjust their previous behavioural norms with sensitivity and flexible strategy. In addition, Byram (2021) and Félix-Brasdefer (2025) highlight the role of language, emphasising the importance of adjusting language use and style in

interactions. During their studies in Australia, the appropriateness of Chinese international students' behaviour plays a crucial role in the effectiveness and success of classroom interactions. Importantly, behavioural competence is not limited to achieving communication goals or ensuring linguistic accuracy. It also involves sensitivity to differences, including the ability to recognise which behaviours are appropriate and acceptable, and adjust them based on strategies that are both effective and appropriate.

These three factors are interrelated. A positive attitude toward cultural differences motivates individuals to acquire deeper knowledge and practise appropriate behaviour. Knowledge informs the ways in which individuals make sense of differences. Behaviour is the output of actions within interactions. The behaviour also influences attitudes and verifies whether individuals can interact appropriately and effectively with people from different cultures. Effective and appropriate intercultural interactions occur only when affective integration, knowledge understanding, and behavioural competence are aligned.

The three factors of intercultural competence (affective, knowledge, and behavioural) will be reviewed in detail in the Chapter 2 literature review. This study will discuss each factor in depth. It will draw on empirical research to illustrate how the three factors influence intercultural competence development. Furthermore, the study will demonstrate how these factors contribute to successful intercultural learning and interaction.

1.4 Research rationale and gaps

1.4.1 Rationale of this study

The inspiration for this research stems from my own experience as a postgraduate student in Australia. When I first arrived in Australia in 2019, I encountered an educational style that was dramatically different from what I had previously known. The invisible classroom traditions and expectations initially imposed immense

pressure on me. During my first three months, I struggled to adapt to the local educational model and often felt frustrated. Having been accustomed to teacher-centred instruction throughout my undergraduate studies and prior language training in China, I had never imagined participating actively in classroom discussions. One of the most best examples is that I initially adopted the role of a passive listener in class, believing the teacher was always right, even when I sometimes had doubts. Although I repeatedly encouraged myself to express my thought with tutors, I found it difficult to overcome this psychological barrier in the first few months. It was only when I became aware of the differences between Australian and Chinese classrooms that I realised language was another barrier preventing me from joining discussions; the rapid speech of teachers made me aware that, despite meeting the university's English requirements, my English proficiency was not sufficient for confident classroom interaction. Over time, as I gradually gained confidence in my English communication skills, I also realised that, despite my efforts to express my views, I could not always elicit the same natural responses from teachers as local students could. My personal experiences and struggles with classroom interaction prompted me to investigate Chinese international students' intercultural competence, as well as how intercultural competence influences classroom interactions with tutors.

Pusch (2009) posed the question "Why is intercultural competence important?" and referenced Friedman (2005) in providing an answer that the key to success lies in the ability to absorb foreign ideas and best practices from elsewhere and integrate them with local traditions. A fundamental concept underpinning intercultural competence is culture itself, which is multifaceted and socially constructed (Félix-Brasdefer, 2025).

At its core, intercultural competence is composed of three widely acknowledged and interrelated factors: affective, knowledge, and behavioural. These three factors are widely echoed in the work of scholars such as Deardorff (2006) and Chen and Starosta (2000), who position intercultural competence not merely as a tool, but as a

process of identity negotiation, perspective-taking, and adaptation.

This concept is particularly beneficial for Australian higher education. For Chinese international students, whether in Australia, China, or elsewhere, the development of intercultural competence is not simply an individual or institutional goal, but also a transformative personal journey. It challenges individuals to critically examine their assumptions, reflect on their positionality, and cultivate ethical engagement with diverse worldviews. Intercultural competence is a critical skill that the Australian education system aspires for students to master. A successful interaction is achieved by combining an open and accepting attitude, comprehensive knowledge, and respectful, appropriate behaviour. This pedagogical focus moves beyond mere tolerance toward transformative engagement, where difference is not a barrier but a resource for deeper understanding and growth.

Intercultural competence can be conceptualised as a developmental process encompassing affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors, all of which ultimately lead to effective and appropriate observable behaviour and communication in intercultural interactions (Deardorff et al., 2023). In international classrooms, intercultural interactions are inevitably shaped by cultural values, customs, and norms (Zhang, 2023). The importance of intercultural competence for students' engagement and participation in the classroom is therefore paramount.

There is no single definition of "culture"; the concept holds diverse meanings for different people (Piller, 2017). Nonetheless, intercultural competence serves as the foundation for international students' interactions and academic success (Zhou & Todman, 2008). Much of the research on Chinese international students' intercultural competence continues to analyse culture at the level of nationality, with Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions framework frequently used as an analytical tool. As a result, Chinese international students are often labelled with a range of cultural stereotypes, such as poor adaptability, low participation, distinct interactional styles, face culture, and insufficient language skills. These stereotypes are believed to

directly affect their classroom performance (Lin, 2006; Jin & Cortazzi, 2011).

However, Holliday (2010) cautions that such essentialist labelling can reinforce stereotypes among other groups.

Chinese international students' experiences of studying in foreign, especially Western, contexts are inevitably mediated by their cultural backgrounds. On the one hand, these backgrounds shape how students perceive themselves and their classroom experiences; on the other, they influence Australian tutors' expectations. Yang et al. (2025) have emphasised the significant role Chinese students' intercultural competence plays in shaping classroom interactions. However, existing research and perspectives on Chinese students' classroom experiences are divided. One approach, rooted in cultural essentialism, attempts to explain classroom interactions or challenges by reference to cultural norms. This remains the dominant perspective for interpreting student–teacher engagement (Dippold, 2015). The other approach views culture as an emergent and interactive process, questioning the adequacy of fixed cultural categories as explanations for interactional outcomes.

Accordingly, an in-depth exploration of Chinese students' intercultural competence in the classroom, across affective, knowledge, and behavioural domains, is essential. This exploration juxtaposes two critical perspectives: the subjective reality of students, reflected in their self-reported perceptions and experiences, and the pedagogical reality of Australian tutors, grounded in their observations and expectations. By integrating the perspectives of both students and Australian tutors to achieve a comprehensive understanding of Chinese international students' intercultural competence. Only by carefully examining the challenges and opportunities for intercultural competence that arise in real-life intercultural interactions can researchers avoid overly simplistic and stereotypical views. This, in turn, promotes a more inclusive and effective teaching and learning environment. The present study is situated within this context, seeking to move beyond predetermined definitions of culture by focusing on students' intercultural competence. The ultimate

aim is to provide theoretical and practical guidance for the development of more targeted intercultural support strategies in Australian higher education. As Piller (2017) has emphasised, avoiding premature assumptions about individual cultural identity is foundational to truly effective intercultural communication.

By integrating intercultural competence research with the practical realities of Chinese international students' classroom interactions in Australia, this study contributes not only to academic debates in the field of intercultural education but also offers practical pathways for both students and Australian tutors to achieve academic and personal growth. Furthermore, it provides actionable recommendations for universities seeking to advance their internationalisation agendas.

1.4.2 Research gaps

Despite the increasing number of research on intercultural competence, several conceptual, methodological, and empirical gaps remain in the literature.

First, at a general level, although intercultural competence has become a relatively well-established field of research, much of the existing work continues to be grounded in static approaches. Intercultural competence is frequently examined as a set of components or attributes, rather than as a socially situated and interactionally co-constructed practice that emerges through the unique discursive engagements of one or more participants (Félix-Brasdefer, 2025). This tendency risks overlooking the fundamentally relational and processual nature of intercultural competence as it is enacted in real communicative settings.

In addition, consistent with the emphasis of Byram (2021) and Félix-Brasdefer (2025), existing models of intercultural competence have tended to under-theorise and under-examine the role of language proficiency. Although language is foundational to intercultural communication, it is frequently treated as a peripheral variable or merely a technical skill, rather than as an integral component shaping how intercultural competence is enacted. Yet language mediates whether affective dispositions and

intercultural knowledge can be transformed into effective and appropriate communicative behaviour. As conceptualised in Deardorff's (2006) intercultural process model, the translation of attitudes and knowledge into behavioural outcomes depends on their external performance in interactional practice. Without explicitly attending to how language resources are mobilised, negotiated, and constrained in situated communication, this transformation is largely assumed rather than empirically examined. Consequently, the role of language proficiency remains conceptually marginalised within much intercultural competence research, despite its centrality to intercultural interaction.

Secondly, research regarding Chinese international students' intercultural competence within international classroom contexts still presents several unresolved issues. Firstly, data sources tend to be limited, relying predominantly on single-method approaches such as student surveys (Ping & Ping, 2024) or individual interviews (Feng, 2025). Secondly, many studies adopt a unilateral perspective, examining Chinese international students' intercultural competence solely from students' viewpoints, without adequately incorporating the perspectives of their Australian tutors, who represent crucial counterparts in classroom interactions (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022; Zhou, 2023).

Existing research has largely overlooked the active role tutors play in facilitating interactions in classrooms, as well as the importance of creating supportive conditions for Chinese international students to enhance their intercultural competence and thereby improve their overall learning experiences and effectiveness. Félix-Brasdefer (2025) argues that, in higher education, teachers serve as mediators in the development of intercultural competence, facilitating learners' understanding of fundamental concepts. He further notes that the development of intercultural competence involves interactive negotiation and contextual variables, such as participants' identities, interaction goals, as well as the prior knowledge, ongoing

reflection, and analysis that participants bring to the interaction, all of which contribute to the enhancement of intercultural competence. Therefore, examining Chinese international students' intercultural competence from the perspectives of both the students and their Australian tutors would offer a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese international students' intercultural competence within classroom interactions. This dual-perspective approach would also better clarify the influence of intercultural competence on classroom engagement for Chinese international students, ultimately enhancing mutual understanding, facilitating the development of Chinese international students' intercultural competence, and contributing to improved educational outcomes in international classroom settings.

A literature review of 96 articles on intercultural competence reveals a key issue that higher education research still focuses on is the theoretical aspects in the affective factor (Xixi & Habil, 2023). Most intercultural training programs concentrate on facts and skills. They often neglect to build an initial affective engagement to prepare students for intercultural development. This leaves a gap, as existing research is not adequately prepared to address the affective challenges faced by students. This situation means the affective domain is still in a transitional phase.

It is moving from sensibility perception to rational cognition in both research and practice. Much of the current research merely organises and analyses data (Xixi & Habil, 2023). It aims to form theories or identify patterns, but it often results in vague recommendations.

However, rational understanding in the affective domain should not be the final goal. This understanding must not remain abstract. Instead, it must return to practice and guide a more sophisticated level of affective activity. The central question is how stakeholders can translate this understanding into new ways of acting. For students, this new affective engagement would be a significant change. It would no longer be their initial, unrefined impression.

Similar to the developmental cycle proposed by Deardorff's (2006) intercultural process model, research on affective should also move from initial passive experiences to rationality and theoretical understanding, and then to theory-informed practice. This process offers a new way of understanding the development of intercultural competence. In addition, from the perspective of teachers, the OECD (2019) found that only about 35% of teachers considered themselves prepared for multicultural classrooms. In particular, Chinese English teachers often oversimplify the importance of attitudes. They tend to believe that addressing students' emotional issues goes beyond their professional capacity.

The knowledge factor shows a similar pattern. Many studies have pointed out that although both students and teachers recognise the importance of intercultural competence, insufficient attention has been given to the practical acquisition of knowledge. Likewise, Ramstrand et al.'s (2024) review of literature from six databases over the past decade indicated that intercultural competence is not only confusing in its definition but also limited and vague in its structure and knowledge base in guiding practice. English teachers often face a knowledge gap and lack the resources needed to practise culturally responsive teaching.

Ramstrand et al. (2024) further suggested that researchers need to adopt systematic approaches to synthesise existing studies in order to identify knowledge gaps and trends across different contexts. In addition, Byram (2021) and Félix-Brasdefer (2025) observed that language-related issues have been noted in recent research but remain insufficiently examined. For example, Yang et al. (2025) identified language as a factor constraining the development of intercultural competence. However, the specific aspects of language that act as limiting factors have not been fully explored or clearly defined.

In terms of behaviour, practice represents a crucial stage where rationality returns to sensibility. Wang et al. (2024), drawing on the OECD (2019), argued that research on how teachers guide students' behavioural norms remains limited. As

Huish et al. (2023) emphasised, it is important to explore how flexible, diverse strategies can be applied to real-world practices. They also stressed that intercultural competence research should strengthen non-judgmental attitudes and address cognitive biases and stereotypical behaviours.

This indirectly raises an important question: how can institutions and tutors systematically support Chinese international students in cultivating effective and appropriate behaviour? This study also focuses on this issue. It examines how tutors and institutions contribute to students' intercultural competence and what roles they play in this process. It also considers how students can move from applying rationality knowledge in practice back to sensibility, thereby completing the cycle of intercultural competence development.

These general gaps above become particularly salient in the context of Chinese international students in Australian higher education. In response to these gaps, the present study adopts a dual-perspective, mixed-methods approach to examine intercultural competence as a situated, interactional, and developmental process within Australian higher education classrooms. By integrating students' and tutors' perspectives, attending explicitly to affective, knowledge-based, behavioural, and linguistic dimensions, and grounding analysis in classroom interaction, this study seeks to contribute to a more process-oriented, context-sensitive, and pedagogically meaningful understanding of intercultural competence development.

1.5 Research objectives

This study has two primary objectives. The first is to assess the current level of intercultural competence among Chinese international students in Australia and identify the Chinese international students' intercultural challenges in Australian classrooms. An adapted questionnaire will be used to quantitatively measure the affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors of their intercultural competence. This

data will establish a cultural issues-based baseline for the research and help identify specific challenges students encounter in the classroom.

The second objective is to explore the core reasons for these challenges and attempt to discern opportunities for the development of their intercultural competence. Qualitative interviews will be conducted with both the students and their Australian tutors to uncover the root causes of any identified difficulties and opportunities. Through this dual perspective, the research will also examine the often-overlooked role of language and skills in intercultural competence. This approach aims to help Chinese international students recognise and develop their intercultural competence, with the objective of facilitating their adaptation to Western classroom contexts rather than altering their cultural identities. At the same time, the study will provide valuable insights for Australian educators and institutions, offering practical strategies and support mechanisms to support international students. The findings will also clarify the roles these stakeholders should assume in fostering intercultural competence.

1.6 Significance

This study emphasises the importance of discarding stereotypical biases against Chinese students and recognising the agency they exhibit when confronting challenges (Xu, 2025), aligning closely with our research orientation of promoting mutual understanding within classroom interactions. Consequently, by incorporating dual perspectives, this study seeks to reveal the challenges and to pursue potential opportunities for enhancing Chinese international students' intercultural competence through the shared expectations. This approach aims to provide valuable insights for facilitating Chinese international students' intercultural competence through co-constructed strategies.

The classroom provides Chinese international students with daily opportunities for intercultural exchange and practical experience. It also allows teachers, as

authority figures, to create and guide activities that develop students' intercultural competence (Riddiford & Holmes, 2015). As Félix-Brasdefer (2025) argues, learners must cultivate positive intercultural attitudes, develop systematic cultural knowledge, and maximise their ability to enact and interpret appropriate interactive behaviours, particularly through active participation in reflective discussions and collaborative activities within the classroom setting. Indeed, how these reflective and interactive learning activities within classroom interactions enable Chinese international students to adapt across affective, cognitive, and behavioural factors is fundamental. This adaptive process is essential not only for their academic achievement but also constitutes a key competence for future careers.

The Australian tertiary education system has different expectations and demands, which create unpredictable new difficulties and challenges for international students and means that they must put in extra effort, work and attention to succeed. Understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by Chinese international students and Australian tutors in classroom interactions provides valuable guidance for the broader development and cultivation of intercultural competence. Emphasising intercultural interaction and developing students who are familiar with international norms, equipped with intercultural competence, strategic thinking, and a global perspective is not only essential for Chinese international students' advancement but also a practical necessity. As the number of Chinese international students in Australia continues to grow, it is crucial to understand their educational experiences, challenges, and adaptability to create a supportive academic environment that fosters both their academic success and personal development. Therefore, research on intercultural competence, which is oriented towards intercultural education, needs to be strengthened, and research on intercultural competence needs to be developed in a practical way, to build a theoretical framework of their intercultural competence in the context of higher education classrooms and to provide guidance for the subsequent design of Australian classrooms in intercultural contexts.

In an era when tertiary education is increasingly focused on intercultural competences, the intercultural competence between Chinese international students and Australian tutors is becoming an essential point in the process of effective learning and teaching in an intercultural environment. However, interaction encounters with different cultural characteristics can cause course failure during academic exchanges due to some misunderstandings or cultural conflicts. It is hoped that this study will clarify the Chinese international students' competence-related issues that exist in intercultural interaction and contribute to closer understanding of each other by providing students and tutors with valid information in Australian classrooms.

In conclusion, this study may have critical implications for researchers, students, tutors and institutional managers in Australia and China. It seeks to propose a new way of looking at intercultural communication for Chinese international students already in Australia or incoming Chinese international students to help them in their academic transition and adjustment to achieve the success they deserve. At the same time, it provides practical guidance and actionable research findings for the intercultural education of tutors at the front line of higher education in Australia.

1.6.1 Theoretical significance

This study seeks to validate and extend prevailing definitions and models of intercultural competence within the context of higher education, thereby providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding intercultural competence in international classroom settings. By systematically investigating the developmental trajectory of Chinese international students' intercultural competence in multicultural educational environments, this research offers novel theoretical insights into the practical application and underlying mechanisms of intercultural competence.

First, contexting the development of intercultural competence within the classroom context extends and empirically validates existing definitions and models,

while also addressing long-standing limitations regarding the treatment of language within intercultural competence frameworks. Although definitions and models of intercultural competence have become increasingly comprehensive and theoretically refined (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022), examining intercultural competence as it unfolds in naturally occurring interactions between students and tutors allows for the exploration of intercultural competence in action. This approach captures how intercultural competence is performed and negotiated in authentic educational settings, thereby revealing how the affective, knowledge-based, and behavioural related challenges identified in widely accepted models influence the development of intercultural competence in classroom interaction.

The Australian higher education classroom, characterised by both high cultural diversity and specific pedagogical norms and interactional expectations, provides a particularly site for examining intercultural competence development. Within this context, students' attitudes, awareness, linguistic resources, and intercultural knowledge influence their engagement with tutors and peers, their adaptation to the host academic culture, and, ultimately, their academic participation and achievement. By grounding intercultural competence in classroom interaction, this study enhances the explanatory power and contextual applicability of existing theoretical models. It also offers deeper insight into how intercultural competence is activated, constrained, and developed through everyday pedagogical practices in Australian classrooms, thereby enriching the contextual depth and pedagogical relevance of contemporary intercultural competence theory.

In addition, crucially, this study explores a notable limitation of existing intercultural competence models: the limited emphasis on linguistic factors (Byram, 2021; Fantini, 2020; Félix-Brasdefer, 2025). Specifically, this research integrates “English language capacity” within the knowledge factor and “language use” within the behavioural factor of the analytical framework. This comprehensive approach not only enhances the explanatory power of theoretical models but also offers a robust

theoretical foundation for stakeholders in international education, including scholars and policymakers.

Furthermore, this study proposes that intercultural competence should be conceptualised as an individual's capacity to actively integrate resources from both home and host cultures across affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors. This competency facilitates the enhancement of intercultural abilities through ongoing interactions, enabling effective and appropriate engagement with members of other cultural groups. By exploring the interdependent relationships among these three factors and elucidating the role of situational context, this research provides fresh perspectives for advancing theoretical understanding of intercultural competence.

1.6.2 Practical significance

From a practical perspective, this research holds significant implications for key stakeholders, including international students, university tutors, educational institutions, and policymakers. For Chinese international students, the findings offer valuable insights into their own intercultural competence, particularly regarding the challenges and tensions encountered during the transition from a Confucian, authority-oriented classroom culture to a participatory and discussion-driven Western academic environment. The growing presence of Chinese international students has brought about numerous intercultural competence-related issues, some of which may result in difficulties in classroom interaction and, in extreme cases, academic underachievement.

For Australian tutors, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of a rapidly increasing group of Chinese international students through the lens of the three factors of intercultural competence. The findings highlight the need for tutors to reconsider and adapt their pedagogical approaches, encouraging the exploration and clarification of diverse interactional frameworks, as well as fostering greater empathy and support for Chinese international students in their teaching practice.

At the institutional level, this research provides comprehensive evidence and recommendations for university administrators and policymakers, advocating for the role of institutions as “coordinators” in facilitating the structured and holistic support of students’ intercultural competence development. Such efforts not only promote successful classroom interactions and academic achievement among Chinese international students but also strengthen the global reputation and inclusivity of Australian higher education.

By investigating Chinese international students’ intercultural competence and its influence on classroom interactions in Australia, this study not only provides valuable implications for the rapidly expanding study abroad sectors in both China and Australia, but also offers actionable guidance for intercultural teaching practices and reconceptualises intercultural competence and delivers both theoretical enrichment and policy-relevant strategies for the effective development, support, and understanding of intercultural competence in international education.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 (this chapter) introduces the background of the study, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, and a brief description of the methodology.

Chapter 2 reviews the definition of intercultural competence and intercultural competence models. The review examines components of intercultural competence and relevant studies on Chinese students’ intercultural competence through three widely acknowledged factors of intercultural competence. Additionally, it compares the potential differences experienced by Chinese international students in Chinese and Western classroom settings. The chapter critically evaluates limitations of prior research and establishes the theoretical framework guiding this study. It also presents the main research question and identifies corresponding research sub-questions

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the research design being adopted in this study, outlining the rationale behind the chosen methodologies in relation to the research questions, as well as the details of the design of survey and scales, and interview outlines. It details the procedures for data collection and data analysis, alongside a thorough consideration of ethical issues, including participant consent and confidentiality measures. Furthermore, this chapter addresses the assessment of the reliability and validity of the instruments employed to ensure the scientific rigour and accuracy of the findings. In addition, demographic characteristics of the study sample are presented to contextualise the subsequent analyses.

Chapter 4 reports the research findings related to the affective factors of intercultural competence of Chinese international students. By utilising descriptive statistics and factor analysis on demographic data and intercultural competence scales, this chapter examines the factors and reasons influencing intercultural competence among Chinese international students. It also delves into the challenges and expectations surrounding Chinese international students in four key factors: attitude, proactivity, empathy, and affective adaptation, as well as the challenges and expectations of Australian tutors.

Chapter 5 reports findings from the knowledge factors of Chinese international students. Similar to Chapter 4, cross-analysis of demographics and intercultural competence scales is applied. This chapter emphasises the acquisition of intercultural knowledge among Chinese international students. It explores Chinese international students' challenges and expectations behind three components: communication awareness, English language capacity, and cultural differences in Australian classrooms, while also addressing the challenges and expectations of Australian tutors in the knowledge domain.

Chapter 6 presents findings and examines the skills and behaviour factors of intercultural competence, analysing Chinese international students' behaviour outputs and the challenges arising from differing expectations of Australian tutors in the

classroom. The analysis is conducted from four perspectives: flexibility, language use, individualism, and communicative sensitivity.

Chapter 7 provides a discussion and conclusion of the main findings of this study, reflecting on the implications for future research and practice. It reaffirms the significance of intercultural competence within the context of international education and emphasises the need for tailored strategies to support both Chinese international students and Australian tutors. Additionally, this chapter proposes areas for further research, particularly in the development of more effective frameworks for assessing and enhancing intercultural competence across diverse educational environments. The chapter underscores the importance of continuous intercultural education for Chinese international students and Australian tutors in fostering mutual understanding and effective communication, offering practical recommendations for improving intercultural interactions in Australian higher education, and contributing to broader discussions on intercultural competence in international education.

Chapter 2 Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature on intercultural competence. It establishes the theoretical foundation necessary for the current study. The chapter defines the key concepts and compares different models of intercultural competence by previous researchers. It reviews previous studies on intercultural competence and focuses on studies related to Chinese international students' intercultural competence and their development opportunities in the Australian classroom context.

This chapter is structured into five sections. Section 2.1 introduces the chapter. Section 2.2 provides an overview of key definitions of intercultural competence, outlining the major theoretical debates and conceptual framework models currently identified within the field.

Section 2.3 reviews the main factors which influence intercultural competence development, particularly in Chinese students, and previous studies relating to these factors. It focuses on the three key factors of intercultural competence: affective, knowledge and behavioural.

Section 2.4 adopts a theoretical framework for this study and explains the reasons for choosing this model for the research undertaken. It also presents the main research question and identifies the corresponding research sub-questions.

Section 2.5 summarises the chapter and provides the conceptual basis for the methodology elaborated in Chapter 3.

2.2 Literature on intercultural competence

2.2.1 Key conceptualisations of intercultural competence

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2023 defined intercultural competence as an individual's composite ability to navigate and manage differences within complex social contexts, facilitating connections

across cultural divides. UNESCO (2023) emphasises that intercultural competence comprises an integrated combination of knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for effective and appropriate interaction in multicultural settings.

The concept of intercultural competence has been explored by scholars from various perspectives, such as intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta, 2005, 2009; Gudykunst, 1993) and international education (Deardorff, 2006, 2008; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). To explicitly delineate the core components of intercultural competence, this study reviews eight key conceptualisations that have advanced our understanding of intercultural competence. The definitions and key elements emphasised by prominent scholars in the field are presented in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1 Definitions of intercultural competence

| Scholars | Definition |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Bennett & Bennett (2004) | “The ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (p. 149). |
| Byram (1997) | The ability of people to interact with people from another country and culture in their own language |
| Chen & Starosta (1996) | “Effectiveness and appropriateness” (p. 356) |
| Deardorff (2008) | “The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 133) |
| Gudykunst (1993) | The least misunderstood communication |
| Neuliep (2006) | “The degree to which one effectively adapts one’s verbal and nonverbal messages to the appropriate cultural context” (p. 441). |
| Spitzberg & Cupach (1984) | Effective and appropriate communication |
| Spitzberg & Changnon (2009) | “Intercultural competence is the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world” (p. 7) |

It is interesting to note that much of the literature on intercultural competence dates back to the 1960s. The pioneering studies of effective intercultural interactions showed that flexibility, curiosity and sensitivity are important components and key factors for effective adaptation to another culture (Ezekiel 1968; Gardner, 1962; Smith, 1966). These early insights laid the groundwork for contemporary understandings of intercultural competence, especially in contexts of growing global mobility in higher education, where students increasingly study in multicultural environments.

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) introduced the notion of intercultural competence as involving “effective and appropriate” interaction, a dual criterion that has become central to most subsequent definitions. In both Chinese and Australian tertiary settings, these two factors resonate strongly: effectiveness refers to achieving interactive goals, while appropriateness concerns alignment with cultural norms and expectations.

Gudykunst (1993) further elaborates intercultural competence as minimising misunderstanding and managing uncertainty, highlighting the role of anxiety when individuals face unfamiliar cultural cues. He argues that unfamiliar norms of participation, expression, or teacher–student interaction may initially lead to interaction hesitation. Effective intercultural competence in this context involves both psychological readiness and cultural knowledge to reduce uncertainty and foster confidence in interactions.

Chen and Starosta (1996) similarly emphasise interaction within specific cultural environments, proposing that competent communicators must be capable of managing both relationships and responsibilities within diverse settings. This perspective aligns well with Australia’s focus on graduate “global citizenship” and China’s growing emphasis on “cultural confidence” in international engagement. In both cases, intercultural competence is not simply instrumental but tied to identity and ethical

responsibility.

Byram (1997) frames intercultural competence through the lens of language education, asserting that intercultural competence entails the ability to communicate with people from another culture in their language. He emphasises that language learning must be inseparable from intercultural teaching. This perspective holds deep implications for Chinese learners of English as foreign language and for Australian universities offering English-medium instruction to international students. Language is not just a tool for expression; it is also a conduit for engaging with other ways of thinking and living.

Bennett and Bennett (2004) define intercultural competence as “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (p. 149). Their definition emphasises that emotions are inherently tied to an individual’s behaviours. Therefore, to be effective and appropriate in different cultural contexts, one must possess culturally sensitive knowledge, a positive mindset, and the necessary behavioural skills. These components work together to ensure that an individual’s actions are both effective and appropriate across diverse cultural settings, underscoring the critical role that behaviours play in the development and application of intercultural competence. In multicultural classrooms across Australia, this requires educators and students to approach intercultural difference not only cognitively, but affectively, with empathy and emotional flexibility.

Neuliep (2006) defines intercultural competence as “the degree to which one effectively adapts one’s verbal and nonverbal messages to the appropriate cultural context” (p. 441). To communicate effectively, individuals must utilise the knowledge they have acquired to adapt to the culture of those from different backgrounds, ensuring mutual understanding. This process requires both parties to possess sufficient knowledge of each other’s cultural context, along with the necessary verbal and nonverbal communication skills (Del, 2017). In an international classroom, where

students are highly geographically mobile and diverse, the Chinese international students' intercultural competence is particularly crucial for fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment.

Deardorff (2008) initiated a study involving 23 international experts in the field of intercultural competence. It was finally established that intercultural competence is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2008, p. 33). Her process model emphasises adaptability, empathy, and self-reflection, capacities that are increasingly valued in both Australian graduate attributes frameworks and Chinese universities’ internationalisation strategies. Both systems recognise that the ability to engage across cultural difference is essential for academic success. Therefore, effective and appropriate communication, knowledge of other cultures, and one’s competencies and attitudes are necessary for effective intercultural interaction (Del, 2017).

Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) deepen this by defining intercultural competence as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world” (p. 7). Their model stresses that meaningful intercultural communication requires more than surface-level politeness; it demands an integrative understanding of worldview orientations. In both Chinese and Australian university settings, this means educators must scaffold not only academic content, but also intercultural processes. They should support students in reflecting on values, assumptions, and communication styles.

However, it is worth noting that the development of an individual’s intercultural competence is inherently tied to interactions, with language being a critical factor in this process. Many intercultural competence definitions and models understate the centrality of language, and scholars like Byram (2021) and Fantini (2020) emphasise

that language is the key component through which individuals shift interpretive frameworks and reorient their worldview. Samovar et al. (2010) also note that the ability to interact effectively with members of another linguistic culture requires not only knowledge, but linguistic dexterity and communicative sensitivity. Deardorff and Arasaratnam (2017) affirm that intercultural competence unfolds in the space between individuals of differing cultural backgrounds, where interaction is necessarily mediated through language. In this light, fostering intercultural competence in higher education requires more than intercultural awareness modules or general education courses. It demands integrating language pedagogies, encouraging dialogue-based learning, and supporting both Chinese students and Australian educators in negotiating meaning collaboratively. Cultural negotiation becomes a central process, where values are questioned, identities are repositioned, and new ways of relating are forged. Through this lens, intercultural competence emerges not merely as a skillset, but as a transformative process of becoming.

In summary, much of the foundational literature on intercultural competence emphasises “effective and appropriate” communication as central to adapting across cultures (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Deardorff, 2008). Early studies highlighted flexibility, curiosity, and sensitivity as core components (Gardner, 1962; Smith, 1966), while later concepts increasingly stressed adaptability, self-reflection, and empathy (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). However, a significant limitation of this body of work is the frequent underestimation of language as a mediating mechanism. Recent scholars (Byram, 2021; Fantini, 2020; Félix-Brasdefer, 2025) argue that language is not merely a vehicle for expression, but how individuals identify, negotiate, and reconstruct meaning in intercultural interactions. For Chinese international students in English-medium Australian classrooms, language proficiency becomes inseparable from intercultural competence development. Therefore, integrating language into intercultural competence frameworks is critical for fostering transformative engagement and authentic intercultural growth.

In this study, intercultural competence is operationally defined as a cycling and developmental construct comprising affective, knowledge, and behavioural dimensions within the Australian classroom context. At the affective level, intercultural competence involves Chinese international students' openness, respect, curiosity, and willingness to engage with cultural differences, as well as their capacity for empathy and emotional regulation in response to local classroom expectations. At the knowledge level, it refers to students' awareness and understanding of both their own cultural orientations and those of the host academic context, including classroom interaction norms and self-appraisal of academic English capacity, which enable them to interpret interactional cues and select appropriate communication strategies. At the behavioural level, intercultural competence is manifested through the application of such affective dispositions and knowledge in observable classroom practices, such as dialogic participation, adherence to local norms, interactional sensitivity, and flexible adjustment of behaviour during interactions with tutors and peers. This operational definition directly informed the questionnaire design and guided the qualitative analysis of classroom interaction experiences.

2.2.2 Intercultural competence models

Intercultural competence has been a focal point for researchers since the 1960s, with significant attention given to understanding its components, the variables that influence it, and the ways in which these components interact. The scholarly interest in identifying factors, fostering intercultural communicative competence, and exploring the interplay among these elements has driven the development of numerous theoretical models (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). These models include compositional, developmental, adaptive, interactive, and process-oriented frameworks, each striving to encapsulate the complexity inherent in intercultural interactions (Deardorff & Arasaratnam, 2017).

Twenty-eight years ago, Byram's (1997) pioneering framework advanced the

study of intercultural competence in classroom settings and inspired extensive research into the relationship between language and intercultural competence (Schauer, 2024). His influential work, however, also contributed to the frequent interchangeable use of the terms intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence in subsequent scholarship, a practice that many studies have continued to adopt and test in their research (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022; Byram, 2021; Deardorff, 2009; Félix-Brasdefer, 2025). This study will also employ both terms, with the ‘knowledge’ and ‘behaviour’ sections emphasising the interconnection between language and culture.

It is important to review the concept of intercultural competence and its multiple contributing factors. This ensures that the components within the framework of this study are relevant and applicable to higher education contexts. This study will review several key models of intercultural competence that have influenced the field, highlighting their contributions and limitations in higher education contexts. The following table outlines key models that have emerged over the decades. In addition, this study will also adapt an intercultural competence framework suitable for the context of this research based on these models.

Table 2.2 Models of intercultural competence

| Model | Scholars | Contents |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity | Bennett, 1986 | Describes the standard ways in which people experience, interpret and interact with cultural differences. |
| Intercultural Communication Competence Model | Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2000 | The relationship between intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural effectiveness. |
| Intercultural Competence Model | Byram, 1997 | Factors of skills, knowledge, education and attitude. |
| Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence | Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005 | Five variables that typically influence culture were identified, namely empathy, experience, motivation, listening, and attitudes toward other cultures. |
| Process Model of Intercultural Competence | Deardorff, 2006 | Based on four factors: attitudes, knowledge, internal results and external results. |
| Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence | Deardorff, 2006 | Outlines the levels starting at the individual level and ending with the desired internal and external outcomes. |

2.2.2.1 Bennett's model

Bennett (1986) was among the early proponents of intercultural competence models. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which uses cultural worldview as its conceptual basis, assumes that intercultural competence develops along a continuum. Within this framework, individuals' perceptions and understandings of cultural differences become increasingly complex and sophisticated over time. Intercultural competence evolves into an ethnic relative mentality (Figure 2.1) in six different stages, characterised by the ability to shift between different cultural perspectives (Leung, Ang & Tan 2014). His framework describes various

ways individuals respond to cultural differences. It was initially intended as a tool for trainers to assess trainees' intercultural awareness and to enhance their intercultural sensitivity, sometimes referred to as cultural sensitivity, which is defined as the capacity to accept and adapt to novel cultural environments.

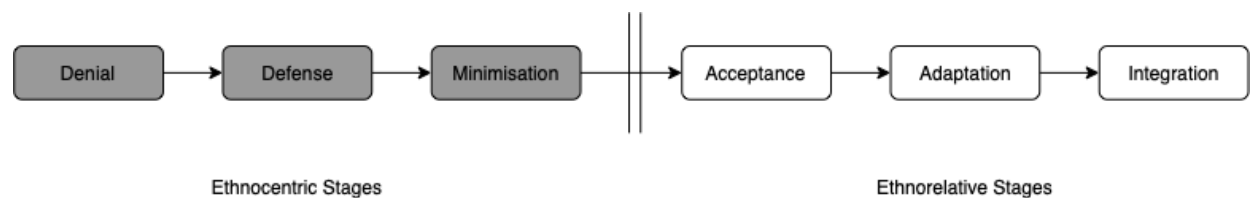


Figure 2.1 Bennett Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986)

The model begins with ethnocentric stages, in which individuals perceive their own culture as the only authentic reality. This is followed by stages where they start to recognise both their own culture and other cultures, but still interpret differences primarily through their own cultural lens. In the minimisation stage, individuals acknowledge cultural differences but tend to downplay them, using the norms of their own culture as a reference point for understanding others. After a period of minimisation, the individual progresses to the ethnorelative stages. At this point, they begin to recognise their own culture as equally valid to that of other cultures. Gradually, they start to modify their behaviour to fit the cultural expectations of others. Ultimately, they may internalise the values and behaviours of other cultures, integrating these into their own identity.

Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is one of the earliest models focusing on the developmental process of intercultural competence. Its strength lies in guiding individuals to shift from viewing their own culture as the sole reality to recognising it as only one of many possible realities. The six stages of DMIS, ranging from denial to integration, highlight the individual's development of attitudes of acceptance toward cultural differences. The model also is seen as a precursor to the emphasis on affective and attitudinal aspects found in many

later intercultural frameworks.

However, as an early model, DMIS does not address many factors of intercultural competence that were not anticipated at the time. Its process primarily emphasises emotional integration. It does not explicitly incorporate components of cultural knowledge and lacks attention to the examination of individual behaviours.

In addition, Hammer and Bennett (1998) developed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to measure the level of development of the individual, group or organisational intercultural competence. Levels of intercultural development positively predicted study abroad satisfaction and the effectiveness of inclusive employee goals, with those at higher levels showing less anxiety.

2.2.2.2 Chen and Starosta's model

Chen and Starosta (1996) developed an intercultural communication competence that aims to promote “the ability of interactants to recognise, respect, tolerate and integrate cultural differences in order to qualify as enlightened global citizens.

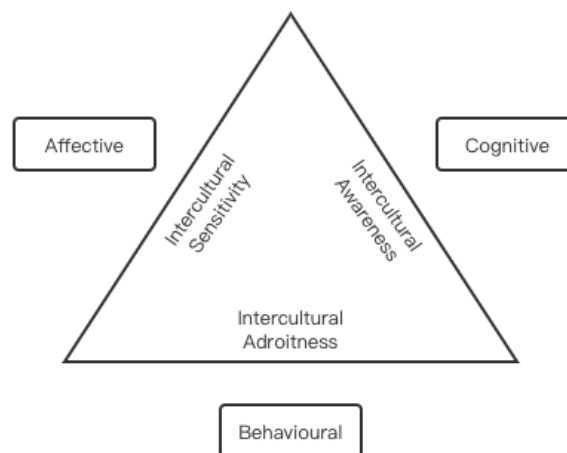


Figure 2.2 Chen and Starosta's model (1996)

The three factors of the triangle model represent cognitive, affective and behavioural. The cognitive aspect is expressed as intercultural awareness, the affective aspect as intercultural sensitivity, and the behavioural aspect as intercultural

adroitness/effectiveness. More specifically, the model assumes that individuals with intercultural competence must possess the ability to understand both themselves and cultures different from their own. They should also demonstrate positive attitudes that acknowledge, respect, and accept cultural differences. Furthermore, they are expected to behave appropriately and effectively in intercultural interactions.

The core strength of Chen and Starosta’s (1996) model lies in its consistency with the three widely recognised factors of intercultural competence. The model is concise and insightful, as it clearly identifies the three key factors required for the development of intercultural competence. However, it overlooks a critical factor of development, namely that intercultural competence is cultivated through interaction.

2.2.2.3 Byram’s model

Byram (1997) constructs a model of intercultural communicative competence in the framework of foreign language teaching and learning from the perspective of language teaching and cultural teaching, and further considers language teaching and assessment. His model is therefore helpful for the training and assessment of intercultural communicative competence.

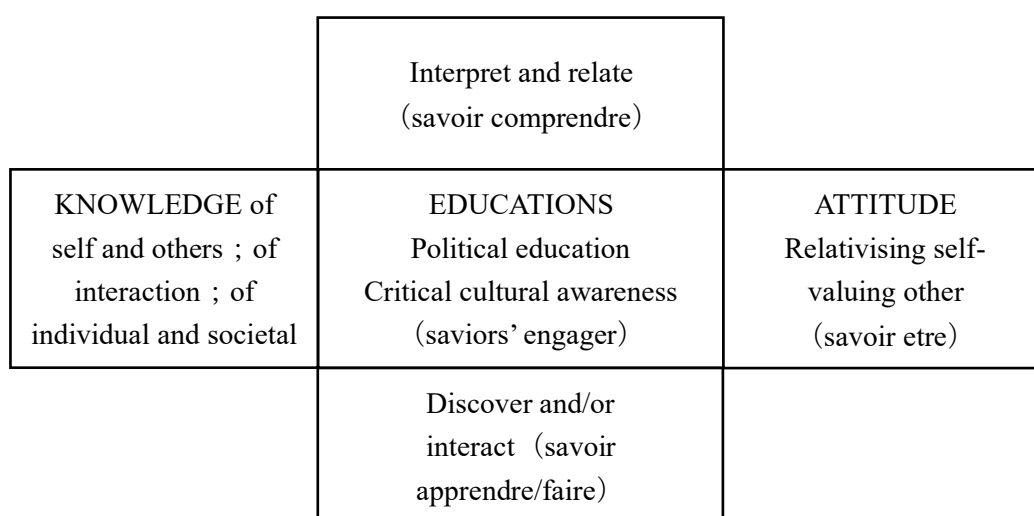


Figure 2.3 Byram’s model (1997)

Interacting with interlocutors from another country and culture requires a basic knowledge of the country's geographical location and political environment (Byram, 1997). This is so as not to appear ignorant and to show respect for the country or culture. Byram (1997) argues that with a clear cultural identity both parties can better communicate with each other to promote understanding. It is believed that successful communication requires the achievement of two goals: effective information exchange and the establishment and maintenance of good relationships. Both aspects rely on attitudinal factors. While a certain knowledge base will have an impact on communication, attitudes towards other cultures and the willingness to communicate will also determine to some extent the success of communication. Byram (1997) classifies skills into interpreting, relating, discovering and interacting. The former is the ability to analyse potential relationships between an individual's native cultural data and data from other cultures. The latter is the ability to explore new data when interacting with individuals from different cultures.

Undeniably, Byram's (1997) intercultural competence model has been widely applied in educational contexts (Deardorff & Jones, 2023; Feng et al., 2025; Sabet & Chapman, 2023). The model includes numerous components and focuses key factors that other models have overlooked. It places particular emphasis on the ability of self-reflection during interactions.

However, the model also has its limitations. Its framework is relatively complex, and it lacks clear connections among the factors to explain the process and mechanisms of developing intercultural competence. In addition, Byram (2021), when reviewing his 1997 model, acknowledged its neglect of language and introduced the concept of linguistic competence. This recognition highlights a broader limitation across several influential models of intercultural competence, which often prioritise attitudes, knowledge, or skills while underestimating the central role of language in intercultural development. Language is not only a medium of communication but also a cultural resource that shapes meaning, interaction, and identity (Byram,

2021). Overlooking linguistic competence, particularly in classroom contexts, is especially problematic in English-medium international classrooms.

Therefore, Byram (2021) argues that a certain level of linguistic competence is required in addition to the previously mentioned components. Intercultural competence can be developed and enhanced in the classroom. However, this also imposes higher requirements. Students and tutors may need not only a basic knowledge of the language, but also an understanding of the culture and a positive attitude towards cultures different from their own. In addition, a certain level of communicative skills is necessary to engage effectively in intercultural interactions.

2.2.2.4 Deardorff's model

Deardorff (2006) proposes a model based on studies of 23 intercultural specialists. It also known as the portfolio model (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009), in which she identifies the components of intercultural competence. The model outlines the components of attitudes, knowledge, and effective outcomes.

Deardorff's (2006) model is a key theoretical framework that outlines the specific factors of competence widely recognised by leading intercultural specialists (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Byram, 2021; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) At the same time, the model illustrates that intercultural competence is an ongoing process. There is no definitive point at which an individual can be said to possess exclusively intercultural competences.

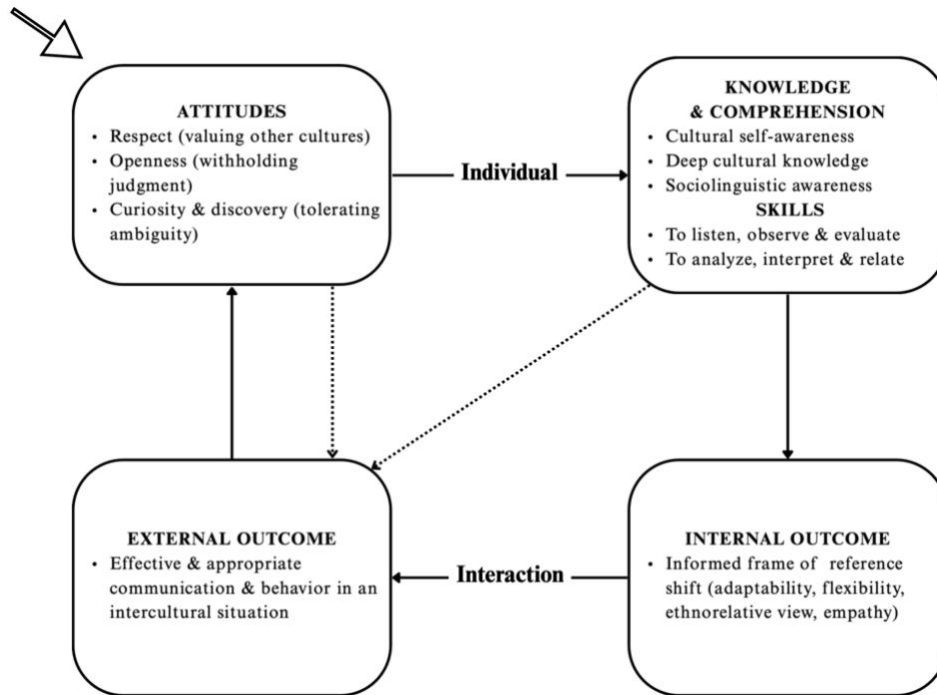


Figure 2.4 Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006)

Drawing on extensive reviews of intercultural competence models, Deardorff (2006) proposed the Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which has become widely cited in intercultural education research. At its foundation, the model highlights the importance of attitudes such as respect for other cultures, openness, curiosity, and a genuine desire for discovery. These attitudinal dispositions serve as the entry point and are essential for meaningful engagement in intercultural contexts. Building upon these attitudes, the model foregrounds knowledge and comprehension as essential components. This includes cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness. It also emphasises key skills such as listening, observation, evaluation, analysis, interpretation, and the ability to relate across cultural differences. Collectively, these cognitive and behavioural capacities provide the critical foundation for navigating complex intercultural situations.

Compared with other models, the strengths of the Deardorff (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence are evident. The model integrates key factors and components and highlights a comprehensive process. In this process, individuals

move from the development of attitudes to the acquisition and application of knowledge through continuous interaction and self-reflection. This progression results in internal outcomes such as shifts in an informed frame of reference, which include adaptability, flexibility, empathy, and an ethnorelative view. These internal outcomes ultimately enable individuals to achieve external outcomes, which are effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in intercultural situations. The model also highlights the recursive nature of intercultural competence development. Positive external outcomes strengthen and further develop individuals' attitudes, which in turn initiate a new cycle of intercultural growth.

Within the context of international higher education classrooms, this model offers valuable insights. The diverse and multicultural nature of such settings requires students and educators to move beyond stereotypical knowledge of cultural differences. Instead, sustained intercultural competence development relies on fostering an environment that promotes openness, respect, and the ongoing refinement of skills and knowledge through real-world interaction. In practice, universities can leverage this model to design curricula and learning experiences that not only impart factual knowledge about cultures but also create structured opportunities for meaningful intercultural engagement and critical reflection. By viewing intercultural competence as a dynamic, cyclical process rather than a static end goal, higher education institutions can more effectively support students' adaptation, integration, and success in globally diverse classrooms.

A limitation of Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence is its strong focus on outcomes while overlooking outputs as a necessary precondition (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). In other words, it places excessive emphasis on whether behaviour is appropriate and effective, while neglecting the concrete and observable actions that occur during the process of intercultural development. This omission reduces its explanatory power for understanding how intercultural competence is actually cultivated in practice. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap

by integrating both outputs, which capture interactive performance, and outcomes, which reflect the appropriateness of behaviour in intercultural contexts.

Overall, the reviewed models collectively outline the development of intercultural competence. Each model has its own strengths, but all of them omit certain key factors or components. Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) laid the foundation for understanding the developmental process of intercultural competence. It provides a reference from a developmental perspective, but it lacks explicit requirements for specific knowledge and behaviour. Chen and Starosta's (1996) triangular model integrates the three widely recognised factors of intercultural competence. However, it does not emphasise the transformative relationships among these factors, the role of processes, or the influence of social interaction. Byram's (1997) model also incorporates the recognised factors and is directed toward teaching contexts. While it is relatively complex and places excessive weight on skill-based output, it remains a valuable framework for teaching contexts. Deardorff's (2006) model synthesises earlier perspectives by integrating the recognised factors and adopting a process-oriented approach to intercultural competence development. Nevertheless, it pays insufficient attention to outputs in terms of observable skills. In sum, the comparison of different models shows that integrating their strengths and compensating for their limitations offers a more effective foundation for advancing the practice of intercultural competence development.

Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) also think many existing models often neglect collaboration and interactive processes, predominantly emphasising individual performance while neglecting joint participation and co-construction processes (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) argue that models commonly presume "effective" and "appropriate" behaviours and communication as unproblematic objectives, despite these judgments potentially harbouring biases. They highlight that misunderstandings and conflicts are co-constructed phenomena, not

attributable to any single individual alone. Intercultural interactions inherently involve mutual dependence; real-world experiences frequently depend on multiple influences such as familiarity or intertextuality (links to previous experiences), affecting interpretation and actions. Thus, intercultural competence should be viewed as a collective responsibility, jointly assumed rather than attributed solely to an individual's capabilities or performance.

In higher education classroom settings, there is no absolute standard for what constitutes “effective” or “appropriate” intercultural behaviour. These standards are often negotiated and co-constructed through ongoing interactions between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves, making it difficult to define them unilaterally. Given that such phenomena are typically observed and analysed through participants' verbal and non-verbal behaviours, our focus necessarily lies in examining how intercultural competence is manifested within specific contexts. Building on this understanding, the present study seeks to explore the intercultural competence of Chinese international students by analysing classroom interactions through the three widely recognised factors of intercultural competence: affective, knowledge, and behavioural. In doing so, it aims to investigate how intercultural competence influences interactions with tutors and within the classroom, and to identify strategies for Chinese international students to develop their intercultural competence in an Australian context.

Drawing on a critical review of these models, this study adopts and adapts Deardorff's (2006) process-oriented framework (Details seen section 2.4 framework of this study), as it allows for the integration of affective, knowledge, and behavioural dimensions and recognises intercultural competence as a dynamic and evolving process. The adapted framework foregrounds those components most salient to classroom interactions between Chinese international students and Australian tutors.

2.3 Factors of intercultural competence and previous studies

2.3.1 Affective factors

In the affective factor, Byram (2021) argues that intercultural competence is a decentring capacity that forms the foundation for understanding other cultures. Without a willingness to question oneself or value the experiences of others, individuals are at risk of developing prejudiced attitudes (Byram, 2021). As a precursor to both cognitive and behavioural factors, the affective component involves the individual's capacity to adopt an open disposition and actively adapt to new cultural environments. A positive attitude toward another culture also reflects an individual's ability to demonstrate empathy, as well as a respectful and sensitive orientation toward cultural differences (Barker, 2015).

Within the framework of intercultural competence, the affective factor plays a preparatory and foundational role in intercultural competence. The attitudes, proactiveness, empathy, and adaptation of Chinese international students are all critical factors influencing the success of intercultural engagement. The affective factor serves as the bridge between the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to enact appropriate behaviour in culturally diverse settings. The affective factor is often regarded as one of the most critical components of intercultural competence (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). The affective dimension of intercultural competence is often an implicit and less visible component.

2.3.1.1. Attitude

Attitude refers to an open and respectful disposition toward cultural differences, a willingness to be curious, and value other perspectives (Deardorf, 2006). This positive attitude lays the groundwork for deeper intercultural learning and interaction. Byram (1997) proposes that an attitude of openness, respect, curiosity, and a willingness to

discover can serve as the foundation of intercultural competence. Similarly, Dardorff (2006) highlights attitude as a central component in successful intercultural interaction, emphasising its critical role in shaping cultural engagement. Attitude also complements the Confucian cultural emphasis on “harmony”, reinforcing the importance of relational balance. As Byram (2009) argues, a positive attitude is a necessary precondition for effective communication with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

In the classroom context, attitude plays a crucial role in facilitating successful intercultural interaction. It should not only be positive but also tolerant, as even seemingly positive biases may hinder mutual understanding (Floman et al., 2017). Learners are encouraged to adopt a curious and open disposition toward the meanings, beliefs, values, and behaviours of others (Byram, 1997). Nadeem et al. (2019) found that students who approach multicultural classrooms with a positive attitude are more likely to participate effectively and achieve mutual understanding. Such an attitude reduces communication anxiety and increases the willingness to engage in interaction. A recent research study by Babao (2023) further supports this view, demonstrating that holding a positive attitude toward other cultures has a significant impact on the development of intercultural competence.

In addition, teachers’ attitudes are a critical starting point that shapes students’ dispositions. A positive teacher attitude can facilitate students’ openness, while negative attitude may affect the development of their intercultural competence. Adili et al. (2023) reported that teachers’ perspectives toward cultural diversity directly influence how students perceive and respond in the classroom. When teachers display openness and respect, they foster trust, allowing culturally diverse students to feel valued. This in turn encourages students to adopt more positive intercultural attitudes in practice. This is similar to the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), in which positive expectations from teachers lead students to demonstrate more constructive behaviours. Conversely, the Golem Effect (Babad, Inbar, & Rosenthal,

1982) highlights that negative teacher expectations can unintentionally weaken students' positive attitudes and limit their potential for intercultural development.

2.3.1.2. Proactiveness

Proactiveness plays an essential role in student engagement within Western-style Australian classrooms and is also considered an affective commitment to learning (Casuso-Holgado et al., 2013). Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith (2017) argue that proactiveness must go beyond traditional transmission-based pedagogies and constitutes a key component in the development of intercultural competence. Research by Kwon et al. (2018) indicates that students who engage more proactively in classroom activities are more likely to stay focused and achieve higher academic outcomes. Conversely, low levels of proactiveness may lead to poor academic performance and, in some cases, a sense of disengagement or academic aversion (Chipchase et al., 2017). Hu et al. (2020) found that proactiveness positively influences students' self-efficacy and also affects their academic engagement. Chen et al. (2021) demonstrated that proactiveness provides international students with a strong advantage in their learning. Their study showed that proactiveness not only has a positive impact on academic participation but also functions as a mediator in teacher–student relationships. Theoretically, they argue that proactiveness enables international students to build stronger relationships with teachers and to participate more fully in classroom activities.

Moreover, Chen et al. (2021) and Adili et al. (2023) propose an angle worth noting: all influences within a learning environment are reciprocal. This highlights the important, but often overlooked, role of Australian tutors in facilitating the experiences of Chinese international students in classrooms. As facilitators of affective support, tutors are integral to helping students navigate emotional and cultural challenges in the classroom. However, to date, there has been limited research examining these affective challenges from the tutors' perspective, particularly in relation to Chinese international students.

2.3.1.3. Empathy

Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of people from other cultures, is widely recognised as essential in the affective domain. Chen and Starosta (1996) list empathy as an essential quality of intercultural sensitivity, and Deardorff's (2006) process model likewise includes empathy as an internal outcome of intercultural development. Misunderstandings arising from cultural differences are common in intercultural interactions. Within the framework of intercultural competence, empathy is considered essential for supporting effective communication across diverse cultural contexts (Bennett, 2008). As Deardorff (2006) suggest, empathy constitutes a fundamental component of interpersonal behaviour. Research has shown that empathy plays a vital role in classroom interactions and in learners' development (Arghode et al., 2013), functioning as a reciprocal process between individuals.

In the classroom context, stereotypes can become potential barriers to the cultivation of empathy. Ji (2022) examined how Chinese international students in the United States perceive and experience stereotypes. He found that internalised labels, such as being cliquey, shy, dependent, or facing language difficulties, can lead to hostility or resistance. Stereotypes may also reduce students' ability to understand the host country's educational values and integrate effectively. A longitudinal study of Zhang and Noels (2024) also explored the link between empathy and intercultural competence among international students. Consistent with Arasaratnam (2016), it found that empathy plays a crucial role in supporting students' adaptation during their time abroad.

In Australia's multicultural educational context, the experiences of Chinese international students are increasingly recognised as important, both pedagogically and at the institutional policy level. Therefore, the extent to which tutors can

demonstrate empathy toward Chinese students' learning norms, language practices, and broader cultural backgrounds is crucial to fostering a meaningful and inclusive educational experience.

2.3.1.4. Affective adaptation

Affective adaptation refers to an individual's emotional adjustment to the host cultural environment (Berry & Sam, 1997). According to Paracka and Pynn (2017), the expansion of one's sense of identity is a foundational aspect of adapting to behavioural differences in intercultural contexts. This identity negotiation enables individuals to navigate unfamiliar social norms with greater emotional resilience and openness. A study by Zhou and Todman (2008) on Chinese students in the United Kingdom found a strong association between psychological adaptation and academic adjustment. Miao and Zhang (2024) further examined adaptation among 432 Chinese international students studying in the United Kingdom, South Korea, and the United States. One key finding was that emotional adjustment positively influences how students manage negative emotions in unfamiliar environments. It also increases participation and reduces prejudice towards out-group members. This finding indicates that emotional well-being and affective adaptation play a critical role in students' ability to succeed in classroom contexts. In addition, He et al. (2023) indirectly demonstrated how emotional regulation can alleviate negative emotions in cross-cultural contexts, supporting adaptation to new environments.

Hence, affective adaptation not only facilitates learners' motivation, engagement, and long-term academic achievement but also enhances smoother social integration. Without adequate affective adjustment, Chinese international students may struggle to access the full benefits of their educational experience.

2.3.2 Knowledge factors

Both Deardorff's (2009) and Chen and Starosta's (1996) models emphasise cultural awareness and knowledge components. Chen and Starosta (1996) define intercultural

awareness as the cognitive aspect of intercultural competence, referring to an individual's ability to comprehend cultural differences and similarities. This closely aligns with Deardorff's (2009) knowledge factor, which similarly includes awareness, deep understanding of other cultures, and culturally specific information. These overlapping areas highlight that cognitive understanding and factual cultural knowledge are fundamentally interconnected. Moreover, Félix-Brasdefer (2025) contends that competent intercultural learners and mediators must not only acquire intercultural knowledge but also integrate their own cultural understanding to engage effectively and productively in intercultural interactions. In other words, both learners, such as Chinese international students, and mediators, such as Australian tutors, need to have at least a basic understanding of each other's cultural backgrounds to facilitate meaningful and successful intercultural engagement.

2.3.2.1 Cultural awareness

Scholars in previous studies pointed out that many Chinese international students lack sufficient awareness of intercultural communication, practical foreign language experience, and knowledge of cultural differences. Liu (2020) identified that many Chinese international students continue to face significant challenges in developing adequate intercultural competence because China's education system remains largely exam-oriented and emphasises rote learning over the cultivation of critical thinking and intercultural awareness. Standardised tests such as IELTS often serve as their primary, and sometimes only, exposure to intercultural content prior to studying abroad.

Traditionally, earlier research portrayed Chinese international students in classrooms as passive learners who struggled to adapt to new educational environments, and had little interaction with teacher (Mu & Yu, 2021). However, recent literature has increasingly challenged these stereotypes, recognising the diversity and adaptability among Chinese international students and highlighting new

opportunities for the development of intercultural competence (Heng, 2018; Xu, 2022a). This evolving understanding not only questions long-standing assumptions about Chinese international students' classroom behaviours but also signals new possibilities for supporting their intercultural growth in international classrooms.

In classrooms, teachers determine what is taught in China, positioning teachers as authoritative repositories of knowledge (Ke, 2022). Wahyudi (2016) also observes that Asian cultural identities continue to shape interactions. In Australian classrooms, for example, Chinese international students' past experiences often result in their tendency to remain passive learners and reticent during tutorials. Such behaviour reflects their prioritisation of maintaining social equilibrium and deference to authority (Wei & Li, 2013). Transcending these deeply ingrained cultural interaction habits is crucial for improving Chinese international students' communicative awareness in Western higher education and for achieving strong intercultural competence.

2.3.2.2 English language capacity

Many scholars underscore language's critical role in intercultural interactions (Byram, 2021; Fantini, 2020). English language capacity is a part of cultural awareness and accessing relevant cultural information. Strong English language foundation can enable individuals to accurately interpret and respond appropriately during intercultural interactions.

English language capacity is also a significant factor influencing the effectiveness of Chinese international students' interactions with Australian tutors in the classroom (Yao & Tian, 2023). Research over the past decade consistently shows that many Chinese students lack sufficient English vocabulary and listening comprehension skills, which directly hampers their ability to follow lectures and participate in discussions (Namaziandost et al., 2019; Yao & Tian, 2023). This deficiency is often attributed to China's exam-oriented English instruction, which emphasises grammar

and reading over communicative practice. As a result, students tend to have weak speaking and listening abilities, a phenomenon colloquially described as “so-called ‘Dumb English’ or ‘Deaf English’”, meaning they perform well on tests but struggle with real-life communication (Wang, 2023; Zhai & Razali, 2022).

As Byram (2009) emphasises, language and culture are intertwined, with language serving as a central component of social interaction, carrying cultural meaning and underlying values. In response to earlier scholarly arguments regarding the role of language, this study innovatively incorporates language into the analytical framework. This approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese international students’ intercultural competence. Language and intercultural competence are inseparable and complementary, closely linked to an individual’s self-development.

For the language code situation, Confucian culture places the highest value on proper interpersonal relations and etiquette (礼 Li) (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Lee (2020), in a study on language politeness in Chinese culture, noted that honorifics are primarily expressed through vocabulary in the Chinese language. This linguistic form plays a key role in conveying respect and signalling hierarchical relationships. For example, in China, it is common to use the honorific “You” as “Ni” (你) for people of the same rank, and “Nin” (您) for elders, superiors and teachers. Similarly, Chinese students often refer to tutors as “teachers”, while Western countries and low-power-distance countries prefer to call tutors by their first names. Thus, in the Confucian cultural communicative environment, the distance between honorific and non-honorific language is considerable and cannot be changed even after a long period of acquaintance.

2.3.2.3 Cultural differences

Within the framework of intercultural competence, understanding cultural differences is essential for effective classroom interaction, an endeavour that extends well beyond language proficiency. Classroom behaviours and interactions are shaped by deeply

embedded cultural practices and attitudes. Many of these are not immediately visible and require a comprehensive understanding of the underlying history, values, and norms of different cultures. As Banks (2015) argues, schools should actively promote the understanding of implicit cultural norms through meaningful interaction. However, limited prior exposure to diverse cultures may hinder students' ability to recognise and appreciate these differences. For instance, Anyichie et al. (2023) found that a lack of cultural understanding in multicultural classrooms often leads to student disengagement, which, in turn, can contribute to feelings of marginalisation and reinforce negative stereotypes among educators.

The influence of stereotypes on classroom interactions cannot be overlooked. As cognitive structures, stereotypes are generalised perceptions based on limited experiences, shaping people's "knowledge" and influencing behavioural judgments (Braslauskas, 2023). Chinese international students may hold preconceived notions about Australian higher education, such as its emphasis on critical thinking and interactive classrooms (Qu & Song, 2024). Conversely, Australian tutors frequently harbor stereotypes about Chinese international students, including perceptions of passivity, reluctance to question, and poor English proficiency (Chen & Wen, 2021). These impressions arise partly from differences in educational philosophies between China and the West, information asymmetry, and insufficient understanding of foreign education systems (Peng, 2023). Accepting these stereotypes without critical reflection limits comprehensive cultural understanding. As Qu and Song (2024) observed, stereotype-driven classroom interactions can create mutual losses, prompting Chinese students to avoid participation, reducing language practice opportunities, and potentially escalating into classroom conflicts or discrimination. Intercultural competence involves overcoming cognitive barriers, dismantling stereotypes, and reducing cultural misunderstandings.

2.3.3 Behaviour factors

Behaviour represents the output factor of intercultural competence, complementing the affective and knowledge factors. It is a crucial determinant of individuals' ability to engage in successful and effective intercultural interactions. As Deardorff (2009) notes, the ultimate aim of intercultural competence is to enact effective and appropriate behaviour in intercultural contexts. It is undeniable that positive attitudes and an open mindset, components of the affective factor, form the foundation of intercultural competence. Meanwhile, awareness and knowledge serve as a bridge connecting affective dispositions to behavioural enactments. Thus, behaviour constitutes the output stage based on the preceding factors, influencing the suitability and effectiveness of intercultural engagement.

2.3.3.1. Language use

Language use constitutes a core verbal skill, manifested in one's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately during interactions (Chen & Starosta, 1998). Intercultural competence is closely linked to language use, with a baseline level of linguistic ability serving as a fundamental prerequisite for all behavioural enactments (Gregersen-Hermans, 2016). Zhang (2018) conducted a review of 21 studies on the experiences of Chinese international students in US higher education institutions. Among these, nine studies identified language barriers as a key challenge. Many of these barriers were attributed to differences in educational and cultural practices between China and the United States. Specifically, American institutions place greater emphasis on oral participation and interactive communication, while Chinese education tends to prioritise reading and writing.

Unlike general language proficiency, the use of language within the context of intercultural competence extends beyond knowledge or skill, emphasising practical communicative ability. The accurate use of the host country's language reflects an individual's capacity to interpret and make meaning within that context (Lantolf &

Johnson, 2007). Zhang's (2018) review further indicated that although Chinese students often perform well on international English proficiency tests, they are frequently underprepared for real-life oral communication in classroom contexts.

However, deficiencies in international students' classroom English usage have long been recognised and remain a persistent concern in the academic literature (Byram, 1995; Liu, 2013; Wang et al., 2017). Liu's (2013) research on the transition of Chinese students from language learners to language users revealed enduring challenges in language use, emphasising the integral role of English as a tool directly connected to academic achievement.

Moreover, language use significantly influences students' confidence and motivation within intercultural environments (Yu & Shen, 2012). Zhang (2018) noted that Cheng and Erben's (2012) study on language anxiety among Chinese international students found that students who could use English with greater confidence reported lower levels of anxiety and demonstrated more positive attitudes toward classroom participation.

2.3.3.2. Behavioural norms

Adherence to behavioural norms refers to observing contextually appropriate conduct across different cultural situations, thus ensuring the appropriateness and cultural congruence of one's communicative actions (Arasaratnam, 2016). There are pronounced and contrasting features between Chinese and Australian classroom behavioural norms. These differences are most apparent in each country's understanding and enactment of power distance. Chinese educational culture places a strong emphasis on teacher authority and hierarchical order, whereas the Australian context prioritises equality and student autonomy. Such disparities in power distance not only shape teacher–student interactional patterns but also fundamentally influence the classroom climate.

China is characterised by a high power-distance index and a strong orientation

toward collectivism, with its citizens generally accepting power hierarchies as a natural part of society (Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede's (2010) research demonstrates that China's power distance index (PDI) is significantly higher than that of Western countries. It indicates that among all countries, China's PDI is approximately 80, whereas Australia's is only 36, suggesting that Chinese society is generally more accepting of authority and hierarchical structures. Within such a high-power-distance context, individuals in China are more inclined to obey authority and prioritise group consensus.

Ying and Briffett-Aktaş (2024) discovered that students with a high PDI often fear expressing personal opinions, which hinders classroom interaction and the development of critical thinking skills. Haarms et al. (2018) argue that the lack of initiative and dependence on teacher prompts among Chinese international students are linked to high PDI and collectivist values. Additionally, Cheng and Ding (2021) observed that, on the part of educators, Chinese teachers tend to be more formal and authoritative. Even when adopting learner-centred pedagogies, Chinese teachers often retain a dominant role, strictly controlling student participation according to the teacher's pace. In contrast, Western educators typically allocate more time for student discussion and interaction, fostering an environment characterised by greater autonomy and interactive engagement. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) highlight that Chinese students demonstrate a distinctly Eastern, collectivist orientation, prioritising group harmony, intra-group obligations, and indirect communication. In contrast, individualistic cultures place greater emphasis on personal autonomy and direct expression. Within collectivist contexts, speakers often rely on contextual cues and nonverbal signals to convey meaning; maintaining silence or avoiding disagreement is viewed as a form of politeness and a means of preserving group harmony (Hofstede, 1980). For example, Chinese students are socialised to "listen to and respect the teacher", avoiding confrontation in order to sustain harmonious relationships. By contrast, individualistic norms encourage direct and explicit communication, as well

as self-confidence. In Western classrooms, students are expected to express opinions openly, ask questions, and engage in debate as integral aspects of critical participation (Ma et al., 2025).

In fact, most East Asian cultures are fundamentally collectivist, emphasising the importance of the group over the individual. In contrast, many North American and Western European countries are individualist cultures, where the needs of the individual are prioritised over those of the group as a whole (Triandis, 2001). Previous research has shown that individuals from collectivist cultures and individualist cultures exhibit different patterns of thinking and behaviour. For example, Grimm et al. (1999), in their study of cultural differences in self-described personality traits, found notable contrasts between collectivist and individualist cultures. Individuals from collectivist cultures scored higher in respect, humility, and cooperation. In contrast, individuals from individualist cultures scored higher in independence and self-confidence. In interpersonal communication, compared to individuals from individualist cultures, those from collectivist cultures are more likely to use implicit and indirect messages (Gudykunst et al., 1996), employ compromise strategies when dealing with conflicts (Cai & Fink, 2002), and adopt a listening-centred communication style (Holmes, 2006). Although some universal traits may be shared by all individuals, cultural variability in communication styles is significant. This suggests that the aspects of intercultural competence required by individuals from collectivist cultures should not be the same as those required by individuals from individualist cultures.

These cultural orientations have a clear impact on classroom interaction behaviours. In collectivist classrooms, teachers are regarded as authorities and sources of knowledge, and students are typically expected to comply with this authority. As noted by Haarms et al. (2018), in classrooms characterised by Eastern traditions, students primarily listen to and respect the teacher, following established rituals and seeking harmony. In contrast, Western-style classrooms encourage students to

question and challenge the teacher. Similarly, Ma et al. (2025) describe Chinese international students as often being silent in class; they tend to prefer working independently or reaching consensus within groups and may withhold their opinions to avoid “losing face” or disrupting group harmony. By comparison, students from individualistic backgrounds expect to establish more egalitarian relationships with tutors and feel empowered to challenge ideas, a practice that supports the cultivation of creativity and critical thinking.

These collectivist and individualist orientations also shape preferences for interaction. Learners from collectivist backgrounds are more likely to support group-based, cooperative activities. For instance, Chinese students often excel in group projects and perceive knowledge as something to be co-constructed (Ma et al., 2025). Notably, collectivist communication tends to avoid open conflict; silence is frequently employed to preserve harmony or when disagreements arise. The concept of “face”, the desire to avoid embarrassment for oneself or others, is a powerful motivator in collectivist cultures, leading to indirect speech or even the avoidance of discussion. In addition, educators working with multicultural student cohorts should recognise that concepts such as face, harmony, and authority play different roles across cultures, and should adapt their classroom strategies accordingly.

Confucian philosophy in China differs substantially from Western modes of thinking, resulting in notable behavioural differences. Confucianism has been regarded as the cultural foundation of social norms and political order in China and East Asian countries for long time (He, 2010). As Huang and Chang (2017) pointed out, Chinese culture and values have maintained significant continuity throughout their long history. The difference in interaction approaches between process-oriented Confucianism and more outcome-driven Western perspectives is evident. In Confucian cultures, communication is viewed as an ongoing process aimed at maintaining social relationships. In contrast, Western contexts often prioritise

achieving autonomy and self-actualisation, making the outcome of communication more critical than the process itself (Yum, 1988).

East Asian classrooms typically conceptualise communication as an ongoing interpretive process (Yum, 1988). There is a strong emphasis on reflection and deep understanding. In contrast, North American classrooms tend to view communication as the transmission of information aimed at concrete results and conclusions (Gutiérrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023). Secondly, indirectness is regarded as the norm in Chinese classrooms. A 2023 study on Chinese international students confirmed that Socratic-style critical dialogue often induces stress, reflecting discomfort with open argumentation (Langen & Roßnagel, 2023). Third, East Asian students generally perceive teachers as the primary authority on knowledge, choosing silence over open disagreement and preferring structured and harmonious interactions. In Western classrooms, by contrast, equal participation is encouraged; students are expected to ask questions, challenge ideas, and engage in debate as part of the learning process (Liu, 2001). Thus, cultivating intercultural competence in higher education requires awareness of these divergent orientations. Research on remote collaboration (e.g., Gutiérrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023) suggests that acknowledging both high-context and low-context behavioural norms can enhance the appropriateness and effectiveness of interactions.

2.3.3.3 Intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity is a crucial component of intercultural competence (Chen & Starosta, 1996). Sensitivity is reflected in the ability to perceive and respond delicately to cultural distinctions, ensuring the appropriateness of one's interactive approach (He et al., 2023). For Chinese international students, heightened sensitivity in interaction can increase anxiety, leading to greater nervousness, withdrawal, and avoidance behaviours (Chen & Hu, 2023).

Intercultural sensitivity refers to an individual's responsiveness to interactions with others from different cultures, which can be a strong predictor of one's ability to engage with people from other cultural backgrounds (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) argue that successful intercultural interaction requires individuals to maintain a high level of sensitivity, to accurately perceive differences in interaction, and to be willing to adapt their own behaviours. A study by Moradi and Ghabanchi (2019), involving 80 participants, found that improving Chinese students' intercultural sensitivity contributed to more successful and effective intercultural engagement.

Beyond the previously reviewed affective and cultural factors underlying low participation, situational sensitivity has also been identified as an important influence on Chinese international students' engagement. Yang et al. (2025) summarise that situational sensitivity is very important and obvious in classrooms, and Chinese students' participatory behaviours are highly dependent on the specific context. For example, in small-group collaborative contexts, students are more likely to participate actively or speak up, whereas in whole-class or hierarchical settings, they often "feel anxious, resistant, and avoidant". This phenomenon is especially salient in tutor interactions: when tutors adopt an egalitarian or non-authoritative teaching style, students may experience "role anxiety", negatively impacting their willingness to speak and engage (Yao & Shao, 2024).

China's high-context sociocultural background also contributes to Chinese international students' heightened sensitivity during interactions. In high-context cultures such as China, information is heavily reliant on contextual and indirect communication. Students who are not fully acclimatised to low-context (direct and egalitarian) styles may over-interpret tutors' tones or feedback, leading to misunderstanding and anxiety, and ultimately diminishing their willingness to participate (Miao & Zhang, 2024). This interpretive bias is particularly prominent in

English-language classrooms and often interacts with traditional “foreign language anxiety” and “communication apprehension” (Yang & Wu, 2023).

2.3.3.4. Flexibility

Flexibility, within the framework of intercultural competence, refers to Chinese international students’ adaptive skills and performance in classroom interaction. Flexibility denotes the capacity to adapt one’s behaviours and communication strategies in response to situational and cultural differences. Kim et al. (2006) contend that Chinese culture encourages flexibility and dialectical thinking, facilitating more complex consideration of multiple influences on a single issue. For Chinese international students, the ability to flexibly manage perceived differences during interaction is critical. Wang et al. (2017) emphasise the importance of flexibility within intercultural competence, arguing that, beyond intercultural cognition, students require practical flexibility in authentic cross-cultural encounters. Chung and Ingleby (2011) also note that sufficient flexibility is necessary for Chinese international students to adapt successfully. When individuals strive to overcome cultural barriers, self-adjustment is essential; however, insufficient adjustment may result in the breakdown of interaction, as both parties are unable to determine appropriate and effective behaviours (Dayringer, 2013).

Furthermore, beyond affective comfort zone, the “third space” also can be a behavioural safe zone. In this space, students are able to experiment with new behavioural norms and classroom practices without fear of criticism. Intercultural classrooms often expose stark differences in participatory styles rooted in cultural conventions; for example, the behavioural contrasts between North American or Western educational cultures and Eastern classroom norms, as reviewed earlier. The behavioural safe zone directly addresses these challenges by fostering high tolerance for mistakes and openness to diverse interaction patterns. McKinley et al. (2019) describe a defining characteristic of the third space as a certain degree of freedom

from evaluation or judgment, allowing students to engage openly. This safe zone encourages students to take risks, to speak up even if language misuse occurs, to ask questions, and to voice opinions they might otherwise conceal.

Another critical aspect of the behavioural safe zone is its flexibility in accommodating different participation norms and communication styles. Simply urging reticent students to “speak up” is often ineffective, as it neglects the cultural and personal factors underlying silence (McKinley et al., 2019). Instead, teachers can employ inclusive participation strategies within the intercultural third space, such as allocating additional time after class in accordance with Chinese students’ customary practices. In a very real sense, the tolerant and low-risk behavioural environment of the third space facilitates the development of intercultural skills that might otherwise be inhibited in more judgmental settings. Therefore, constructing a behavioural safe zone, a third space, within the classroom can ensure that Chinese international students participate, experience, and develop intercultural competence within a supportive atmosphere.

2.4 Conceptual framework of this study and research questions

This study adopts Deardorff’s (2006) Process Model and key components from Byram’s (1997) and Chen and Starosta’s (1996) models of intercultural competence and serves as the conceptual framework foundation. Building on this synthesis, the present study develops a comprehensive analytical framework to explore and conceptualise the intercultural competence of Chinese international students in international classroom settings. This integrated framework is conceptualised through three interrelated and cyclically reinforcing factors, affective, knowledge, and behavioural, each of which mutually informs and shapes the others throughout the intercultural learning process.

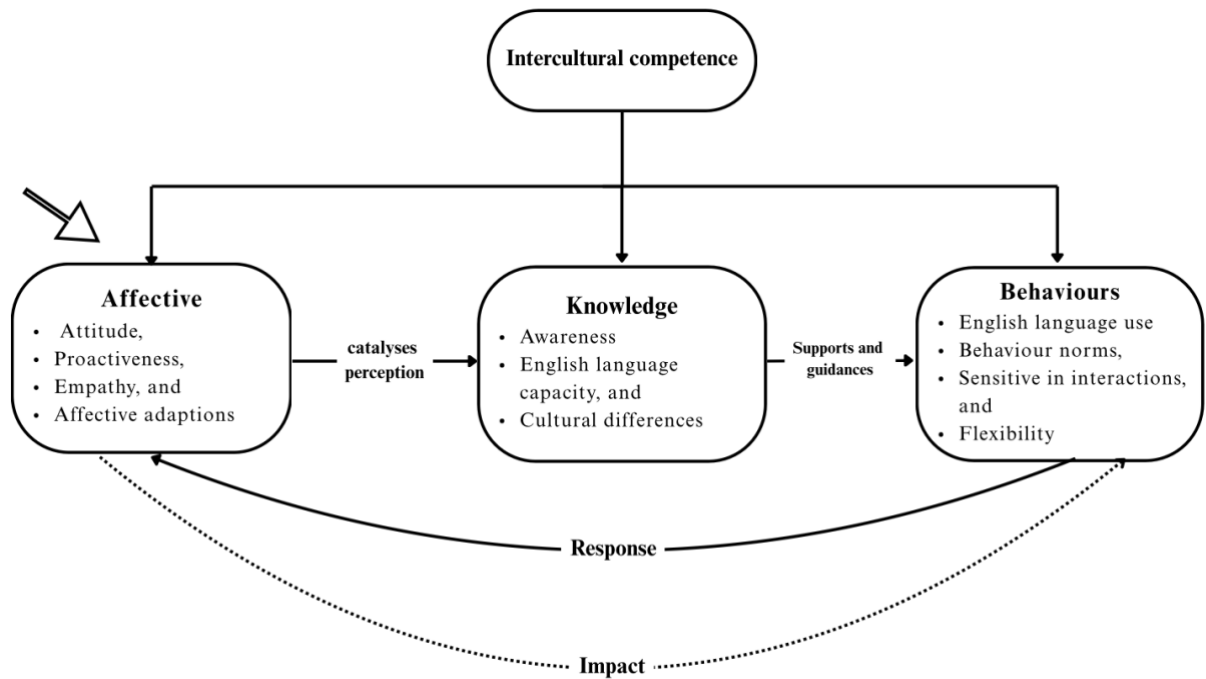


Figure 2.5 The conceptual framework of this study

Figure 2.5 Conceptual framework illustrating the constitutive components of intercultural competence and their operational indicators in classroom interaction. In this study, affective, knowledge, and behavioural dimensions are conceptualised as constitutive components of intercultural competence. The elements listed under each dimension represent operational indicators that guide data collection and analysis in the context of classroom interaction. This framework guided the inquiry by linking students' affective dispositions, classroom-related knowledge, and observable behaviours to their interactional experiences with tutors. It enabled the analysis of how intercultural competence is enacted and developed through classrooms interactions rather than treated only as an abstract cultural traits. The bullet points represent operational indicators through which each factor is examined in classroom interaction.

The affective factor encompasses students' attitudes, proactiveness, empathy, and affective adaptations. This aligns with Deardorff's (2006) emphasis on openness and attitudes, which underscore students' proactive engagement with intercultural interactions and the internal components of empathy and adaptability. Additionally, it

integrates Byram's (1997) conceptualisation of attitude, further complemented by Chen and Starosta's (1996) perspective on the affective factor.

The knowledge factor comprises communicative awareness, English language capacity, and knowledge of cultural differences. This aligns with Deardorff's (2006) focus on deep cultural knowledge and resonates with the social constructivist perspective, viewing intercultural knowledge as actively co-constructed through ongoing interactions. This factor also incorporates Chen and Starosta's (1996) cognitive emphasis on awareness, along with Byram's (1997) definition of knowledge as an understanding of self and others within cultural interactions. To address critiques by Byram (2021) and Fantini (2020) regarding the insufficient attention to language in previous models, language competence is specifically articulated as "English language capacity", which highlights the linguistic resources Chinese international students possess. In addition, English language use, including the exploration of language errors or misuse during intercultural interactions, is situated within the behavioural factor.

The behavioural factor addresses English use, behavioural norms, interactional sensitivity, and flexibility. This conceptualisation corresponds with Deardorff's (2006) notion of internal flexibility, including behavioural adaptability, and external behavioural norms encountered across cultural boundaries. It integrates Chen and Starosta's (1996) sensitivity mechanism specifically into behavioural actions, differentiating it from the affective factor's sensitivity to emotions. Collectively and interdependently, these factors facilitate intercultural competence: affective openness drives proactive engagement with cultural knowledge and adaptive behaviours; knowledge gained through classroom interactions enhances empathy and effective communication; while behavioural adjustments provide evidence of intercultural competence in practice.

To meet the two objectives of this study, the thesis will follow the framework

and explore three core factors of intercultural competence: affective, knowledge and behavioural. Accordingly, this study will address three research questions:

RQ 1: *What are the affective factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?*

RQ 2: *What are the knowledge factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?*

RQ 3: *What are the behaviour factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?*

Although the three research questions address distinct dimensions of intercultural competence, they are analytically separated for clarity while being theoretically understood as interrelated components within a single developmental process.

Research sub-questions

A set of research sub-questions was developed based on the literature review. Based on the objectives and central research questions outlined in Chapter 1, these sub-questions are categorised according to the three primary dimensions of intercultural competence. Specifically, this study addresses the following sub-questions:

Table 2.3 Sub-research questions

| Main research questions | Sub-question |
|---|---|
| RQ1. <i>What are the affective factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?</i> | <p>RQ 1-1 What are the attitudes of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> <p>RQ 1-2 What are the proactiveness of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> <p>RQ 1-3 What are the empathy of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> <p>RQ 1-4 What are the affection adaptations of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>RQ2. <i>What are the knowledge factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?</i></p> | <p>RQ2-1 What are the awareness of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> <p>RQ2-2 What are the English language capacities of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> <p>RQ2-3 What are the cultural differences of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> |
| <p>RQ3. <i>What are the behaviour factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?</i></p> | <p>RQ3-1 What are the language uses of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> <p>RQ3-2 What are the behaviour norms of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> <p>RQ3-3 What are the sensitivity of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> <p>RQ3-4 What are the flexibility of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?</p> |

The first core research question (RQ1) of this study focuses on the affective factors of Chinese international students' intercultural competence in classroom interactions, specifically focusing on students' attitudes, proactiveness, empathy, and affective adaptations. The quantitative findings will reveal the current affective challenges faced by Chinese international students when interacting with Australian tutors in classrooms. These challenges include attitudes toward interactive Australian classrooms, students' proactiveness in engaging with tutors, their empathy toward different cultures, and their capacity for affective adaptation to new classroom environments. The study will also examine the reasons behind challenges

The second research question (RQ2) investigates the knowledge factors of Chinese international students' intercultural competence, primarily encompassing students' intercultural awareness, English language capacity, and knowledge of cultural differences. Quantitative analysis will identify Chinese international students' challenges in relation to awareness of interactive learning in Australian classrooms, their English language capacity, and their knowledge of cultural differences between

China and Australia, and the reasons behind the challenges. In addition, the analysis will examine the complementary strengths and challenges experienced by both students and tutors in knowledge exchange and understanding.

The third core research question (RQ3) seeks to analyse the behavioural factors of Chinese international students' intercultural competence in classroom interactions, particularly focusing on English language use, behavioural norms, sensitivity, and flexibility.

To address these three core research questions, this study employs a mixed-methods approach (details are in Chapter 3), incorporating both survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Data collection includes student self-assessments, student subjective interviews, and tutor observations. Quantitative analyses systematically reveal the current status and challenges of intercultural competence across affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors. Qualitative interviews provide in-depth insights into how intercultural competencies influence interactions within real classroom contexts. Thematic analysis further explores what reasons will influence classroom interactions and comprehensively illustrates the diverse manifestations of Chinese international students' affective, knowledge, and behavioural competencies.

In the context of Chinese students in Australian higher education, it is particularly appropriate to focus on affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors. This approach considers the whole person. It addresses their feelings and attitudes towards classroom interaction (affective), their knowledge of Australian classroom practices and potential cultural differences in interaction (knowledge), and their observable behaviours within the classroom (behavioural). These behaviours may include differing participation styles, modes of interaction, and strategies for managing classroom communication. By examining these factors, educators and researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of students' intercultural competence. For example, a student who remains quiet in class may, through analysis

across these three factors, be found to experience anxiety, lack knowledge about interactional differences, and possess limited skills in classroom discussion. Indeed, interventions that simultaneously address knowledge-building, affective adjustment, and behavioural practice have been recognised as a way to significantly enhance students' intercultural competence (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Thus, validating the applicability of all three factors for improving the intercultural competence of Chinese international students in classroom interactions is important.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has reviewed the theoretical foundations essential for exploring intercultural competence. The chapter began by defining the concept of intercultural competence, outlining historical developments and models, and highlighting strengths and limitations, encompassing affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors, crucial for effective intercultural competence development.

The chapter then reviewed previous studies and related interaction patterns of Chinese international students through the lens of these factors.

Through a critical comparison of influential models, particularly those by Bennett, Byram, Deardorff, Chen and Starosta, and Fantini, the chapter formed diverse theoretical perspectives into a comprehensive framework of this study. This integration aims to address gaps identified in previous research.

Building on the literature review this chapter synthesised the intercultural competence framework comprising three interconnected factors: affective, knowledge, and behavioural. The framework has not only guided the conceptual foundation of the study but also formed the research design to explore students' affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors that influence their intercultural competence development.

In summary, this chapter sets the stage for the methodological framework detailed in Chapter 3. The next chapter outlines the mixed-methods research design

and demonstrates how quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews are strategically employed to empirically investigate and validate the factors of intercultural competence identified through this theoretical exploration.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research design and methodology of this study and describes approaches and methods adopted. The description begins with three focused factors of consensus on intercultural competence (affective, knowledge and behavioural) derived from a literature review of concepts, definitions and previous relevant studies.

Section 1 provides a brief introduction to the structure of this chapter. Sections 2 and 3 outline the research design and the instruments used for data collection. They offer detailed information on the research process, including the specifics of each stage. The instruments and measurements, such as surveys, include questions used to collect data are presented to clarify how each component supports the overall methodological framework.

Sections 4 and 5 present the data collection procedures and the analytical methods used in the study. They provide a detailed account of the data gathering process and the specific analytical techniques applied, including the assessment of the instruments' reliability and validity, as well as the coding strategies and examples used in the qualitative analysis. The sections also describe the demographic characteristics of the participants—gender, age, current study status, field of study, and self-reported English language proficiency—offering a comprehensive overview of the dataset. Additionally, they outline the data collection procedures and the evaluation of data reliability and validity.

Section 6 provides an overview of ethical considerations. It addresses informed consent, anonymity, participants' emotional well-being, and language choice in interviews to ensure cultural and communicative equity. It also reflects on the researcher's stance, assumptions, and advocacy which may influence the research process. This study also proposes strategies to mitigate these potential influences. Finally, Section 7 summarises the chapter, outlining the methodological

design, data collection, and analysis, and highlighting key descriptive results. This section also sets the stage for the data presentation in the following three chapters.

3.2 Research design

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, which emphasises the importance of both objective evidence and subjective experience in understanding phenomena and addressing research questions (Creswell, 2017). The design enables a systematic investigation of challenges and opportunities for the Chinese international students when developing their intercultural competence in classroom contexts. Guided by a problem-oriented principle this approach of mixed method avoids the binary division of traditional methods that rely solely on either qualitative or quantitative strategies.

Quantitative data represent objective measurement and allow for the rapid identification of the intercultural competence challenges that Chinese international students encounter in the classroom context. This addresses the “what” dimension of the research questions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). On the other hand, qualitative research focuses on in-depth exploration of subjective experiences. It explores how students and tutors respond to challenges and negotiate opportunities within shared contexts. This addresses the “why” and “how” dimension of the research questions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015) and reflects an integration of rationality and sensibility.

Therefore, a mixed-methods design is the most appropriate choice for this study. It allows the research to move from abstract measurement of challenges faced by Chinese international students to concrete and experiential understanding. This approach strengthens empirical rigour (Creswell, 2017), remains faithful to the voices of both students and Australian tutors, and ultimately leads to the integration of theory (rationality) and guides strategic practices (Beiser, 2005). The study, thus, offers meaningful and constructive insights and recommendations for relevant stakeholders.

3.2.1 Research Steps

In the first phase, standardised questionnaires were administered to a large sample of students, assessing their intercultural competence across the affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors. This provides a quantitative profile of students' intercultural engagement, which serves as an empirical basis for identifying challenges and constraints in the development of their intercultural competence. These patterns of engagement are interpreted in this study as indicative of developmental challenges rather than static performance deficits.

Subsequently, the second phase involves semi-structured interviews with selected students and Australian tutors. These interviews offer an in-depth exploration of participants' classroom experiences based on the challenges identified in the survey. It aims to several developmental challenges in Chinese international students' intercultural competence, as manifested through their classroom interactional performances and to identify potential strategies for facilitating Chinese international students' intercultural competence. Importantly, these performance-based challenges also illuminate the difficulties tutors encounter when supporting students' intercultural competence development, thereby pointing to potential institutional and pedagogical opportunities.

Ultimately, the integration of these two phases echoes the sequential explanatory design. This approach not only allows for the validation of quantitative findings, but also enriches them with qualitative insights. As a result, it strengthens the complementarity and depth of the research (Creswell, 2017).

The implementation of this study consists of two interrelated stages: the questionnaire phase and the interview phase.

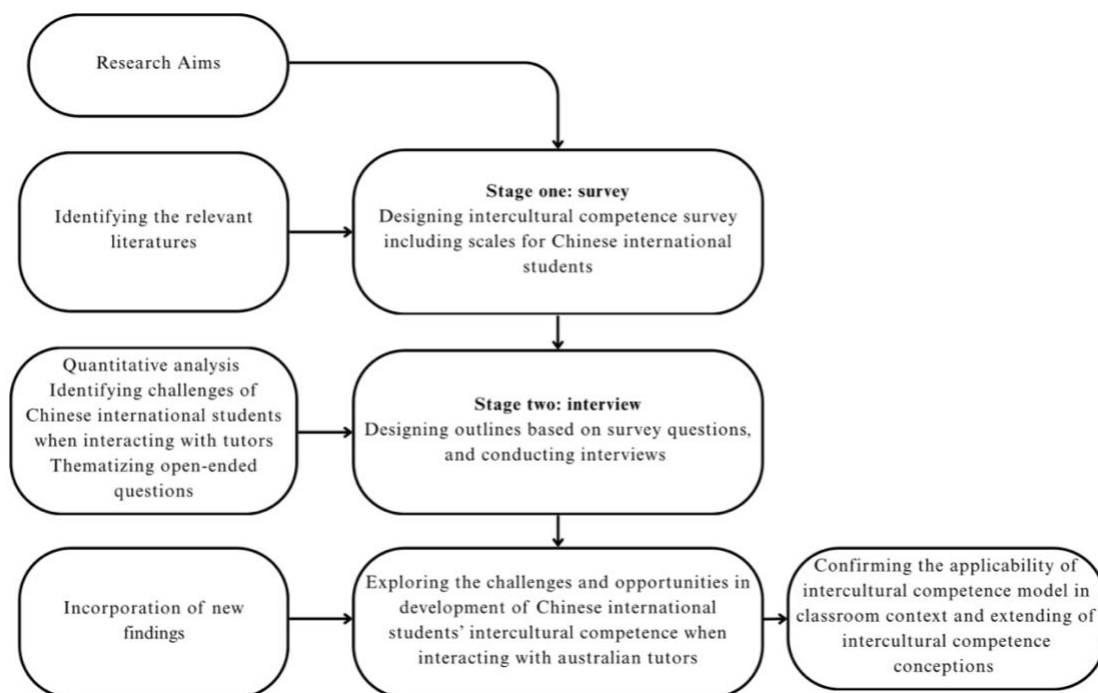


Figure 3.1 Research steps

The quantitative and qualitative phases of this research design are closely interconnected. The quantitative analysis conducted during the first phase provides essential empirical support and preliminary findings for the subsequent qualitative interviews. The qualitative phase then allows for deeper exploration, verification, and interpretation of trends, disparities, and particularly noteworthy items identified in the quantitative stage. Such an integrated mixed-methods approach not only captures broad patterns of classroom interactions among Chinese international students within the three factors of intercultural competence (affective, knowledge, and behavioural) but also facilitates an in-depth understanding of individual experiences. This comprehensive methodological framework thus enables a more thorough and detailed conceptualisation of intercultural competence in higher education contexts. It also assesses the applicability of existing intercultural competence models within the classroom context and identifies potential avenues for enhancing students' intercultural competencies.

3.2.1.1 Stage one: the questionnaire stage

Based on the theoretical framework established from the literature review, the researcher designed a questionnaire specifically adapted to the context of the classroom with Chinese international students and Australian tutors. This questionnaire primarily focuses on three core factors of intercultural competence: affective, knowledge, and behavioural, with each factor subdivided into multiple subcomponents (details are in the questionnaire design section). The questionnaire systematically investigates students' intercultural challenges within Australian classrooms, alongside demographic variables such as academic discipline, English language proficiency, and personality traits, to determine their potential positive or negative influences on intercultural competence. Additionally, notable questionnaire findings, such as significantly high or low-scoring items, will form the basis for the interview protocol in the second qualitative phase. The quantitative approach adopted in this phase is particularly well-suited for identifying general trends and patterns of Chinese international students' challenges of intercultural competence. It provides an objective and statistically robust overview of Chinese international students' intercultural competence in Australian classrooms and its impact on their academic adaptation. Noteworthy findings from the questionnaire, including items that exhibit especially high or low scores, subsequently inform the development of the interview protocol for the qualitative phase.

3.2.1.2 Stage two: the qualitative stage

The second phase involves semi-structured interviews designed to delve deeper into particularly notable or unusual findings identified during the questionnaire phase. Interviews explore reasons behind challenges, and potential strategies and opportunities behind these quantitative outcomes from the perspectives of both Chinese international students and Australian tutors, based on their direct classroom experiences (details regarding samples and sampling methods are presented in the

data collection section). While the quantitative phase provides breadth and generalisability, the qualitative phase is designed to elicit rich, detailed narratives and insights. It clarifies participants' intercultural competence in terms of affective factors, knowledge gaps, and culturally influenced behavioural norms when interacting with Australian tutors in classrooms. Moreover, interviews with Australian tutors are intended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of classrooms interaction realities from the perspective of another key participant in the interaction. Specifically, these interviews seek to elicit tutors' observations regarding students' affective engagement, knowledge acquisition, and behavioural patterns. This approach is inherently exploratory, enabling the identification and thematisation of salient themes or unusual phenomena as perceived by different stakeholders. By drawing insights from both student and tutor groups, the study facilitates a holistic exploration of effective and contextually appropriate strategies for enhancing Chinese international students' intercultural competence within classroom interactions.

3.2.2 Integration and research flow

The two research phases are closely interconnected, following a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The quantitative analysis identifies key trends and challenges, while the qualitative phase offers explanations and contextual depth to these findings. This methodological integration aligns with the research flow presented in Figure 3.1, which outlines the process from defining research aims and identifying relevant literature, to conducting surveys and interviews, and finally to incorporating new perspectives and conceptual extensions. Through this integrated approach, the study not only confirms the applicability of intercultural competence models in classroom contexts, but also extends the conceptualisation of intercultural competence. It highlights both the challenges and opportunities for enhancing Chinese international students' development through interactions with Australian tutors. Ultimately, the complementary strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods

provide both breadth and depth, enabling a more comprehensive and contextually grounded analysis of intercultural competence in higher education settings.

3.3 Instruments of this study

The survey method has long been used to probe particular phenomena and the perceptions of a group. By asking individuals to what extent they know, believe, or observe certain phenomena, researchers can gather information that describes respondents' emotions and perceptions, as well as the demographic characteristics of those who hold such views (Babbie, 1990).

Firstly, the structured questionnaire was designed to assess Chinese international students' intercultural competence based on widely recognised factors identified in the literature review— affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors. Apart from the demographic section at the beginning and open-ended questions at the end, the core items measuring intercultural competence were adapted from established scales (details seen below) to adapt with the context of Australian classrooms (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Kelley & Meyers, 1992; Koester & Olebe, 1988).

Secondly, following Patton's (1990) strategy for semi-structured interviews, the interview outline was developed by integrating key issues identified through the survey findings and open-ended questionnaire responses. This approach ensured that critical topics were covered while also allowing for the deeper exploration of participants' authentic experiences and details of classroom interaction.

3.3.1.1 Student questionnaire

The student questionnaire is comprised of five sections. The first section collects basic demographic information. The second, third, and fourth sections assess the affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors of intercultural competence, respectively. Each of these sections employs a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Extremely unconfident) to 5 (Extremely confident), with scenario-based

classroom interactive items for Chinese international students. The fifth section consists of three open-ended questions, including what the most difficult aspect of communication in an Australian classroom was, what was the most difficult course, and which course gained the most knowledge. All items are adapted for the classroom context and are clear, simple and straightforward to ensure the audience understands the content.

In the information sheet, the researcher explains the concerns and perceptions of the Chinese international students involved in this study when interacting with their Australian tutors in the classroom at one of the universities in Australia, while ensuring that their anonymity is guaranteed.

In the first part, participants were asked to provide their demographic background and relevant experiences. This included information on gender, age, academic level and discipline. In addition, a self-report presentation topic was included with the aim of exploring the reasons for the audience's ability to relate well to culturally diverse environments.

The second, third and fourth parts are presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale. It is used to identify the challenges of Chinese international students' intercultural competence in Australian classrooms. All items were generalised and reclassified according to the intercultural competence model and some scales reviewed in the literature review. The main parts are divided into the three parts which are affective, knowledge and behavioural parts. The affective part is divided into attitude (questions 1–6), proactiveness (questions 7–12), empathy (questions 13–19), and affective adaptability (questions 20–23). The knowledge part is divided into three sections: cultural awareness (questions 24–28), English language capacity (questions 29–31), and cultural differences (questions 32–36), which assess knowledge about norms in multicultural classrooms. The behaviour section is divided into flexibility (questions 37–40), language use (questions 41–45), behaviour norms (questions 46–49), and communication sensitivity (questions 50–

56). Most questions are adapted for the higher education classroom context from the following instruments: the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000), the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (Kelley & Meyers, 1992), the Developmental Model of Intercultural Maturity (Perez et al., 2015), the Value Survey Module (Hofstede & Minkov, 2013) and the Behavioural Assessment Scale for Intercultural Communication (Koester & Olebe, 1988).

The final part consisted of three open-ended questions that asked students to identify what was difficult about communicating with tutors. The response categories were drawn from the participants' personal experience. In addition, in the last question the participants were invited to fill in whether they would like to participate in the interview. If they were willing to participate, they could write down their contact details or contact the researcher. Their name and telephone number sections would be removed when the questionnaire was analysed in order to maintain their absolute anonymity.

3.3.1.2 Semi-structured interviews with Chinese international students and Australian tutors

When the questionnaire was returned and challenges had been identified, the researcher started collecting interview data.

In this study, interviews were employed as a semi-structured qualitative tool, designed in strict accordance with Patton's (1990) interview guide approach. This method ensures that, while a predetermined thematic framework is maintained, sufficient flexibility is preserved to balance comprehensive topic coverage with the depth of conversational exploration. The interview outline was developed by integrating key intercultural challenges and open-ended question answers identified in the questionnaire. This approach ensured that the interviews both responded to quantitative findings and further investigated participants' classroom experiences and potential obstacles.

The interview process consisted of three main sections. First, an introductory segment clarified the purpose of the interview, outlined confidentiality measures and ethical considerations, and obtained written informed consent from participants. Second, the core question section focused on the three factors of intercultural competence. It explored participants' classroom experiences, observations, feedback, obstacles, and responses during interactions with tutors, based on challenges identified in the survey. This section utilised open-ended primary questions alongside follow-up questions. Finally, participants were asked about their expectations regarding classroom interactions with one another.

The design principles for interview questions included the use of concise, non-leading, and open-ended language, deliberately avoiding closed or suggestive phrasing to ensure the generation of rich narrative data. Where necessary, neutral prompts (such as "Could you give an example?") were used to extend dialogue and minimise bias.

In addition, methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing and validating the interview findings with the quantitative questionnaire data, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the study.

3.4 Data collection

Most data in this study were collected between February 2023 and February 2024. Some supplementary interview data, used as comparative data with tutors who did not have a Chinese background, were collected in March 2025. This section describes the questionnaire administration and interview procedures. Section 3.4.1 introduces the participant scope of the study, specifically Chinese international students and Australian tutors involved in classroom interaction. The recruitment strategy and sampling criteria for Chinese international student participants are detailed in Sections 3.4.2 and 3.4.3.

3.4.1 Participants

Data were collected from the participants from two groups: Chinese international students and their Australian tutors.

3.4.1.1 Chinese international students

The Chinese participants were Chinese international students from mainland China, whose mother tongue is Mandarin Chinese, English being their second language. According to this university, the number of Chinese international students was over 12,000. All participants were selected from this group.

3.4.1.2 Australian tutors

In this study, Australian tutors refer to undergraduate and postgraduate tutors at the university who are responsible for teaching or tutoring in Australian higher education classrooms and who provide academic guidance and feedback to students. All participants must have had substantive experience tutoring Chinese international students, ensuring they possess relevant intercultural classroom experience. Tutors with a Chinese background were intentionally included because they occupy a unique intermediary position, enabling comparison between tutors who share students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and those who do not. This inclusion allows for a more comparative examination of how cultural familiarity influences tutors' interpretations of classroom interaction and student engagement.

For analytical purposes, Australian tutors will be categorised into three distinct groups: (1) tutors with a Chinese background, (2) tutors without a Chinese background but with experience studying or working in China, and (3) tutors without any Chinese background or experience in China. This categorisation enables systematic comparison across tutors with varying degrees of cultural familiarity, while maintaining a shared institutional and pedagogical context.

3.4.2 Quantitative data collection

Questionnaires, as effective tools for measuring research variables, have been widely utilised in empirical studies. Prior to formally commencing data collection, a pilot survey was conducted on the campus of the university. Convenience sampling was employed to select readily available samples (Dhivyadeepa, 2015). The pilot process aided in identifying potential issues with the items before administering the instrument to the actual population. Following the pilot phase, certain parts of the survey were removed. For example, delineation of regions in China (northern and southern) there is no official definition. Redundant items within the questionnaire, were were also eliminated.

Based on considerations of sample size and convenience, the formal data collection began using a convenience sampling approach. The researcher conducted on-site random sampling at the university campus over a period of six months, approaching eligible participants within the campus premises for voluntary participation. Upon encountering eligible participants who expressed willingness to participate and met the sample criteria, Chinese international students were asked to sign a consent form before completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was available in both English and Chinese to ensure full comprehension. Participants were allotted 30–45 minutes to complete the survey and were given the opportunity to seek clarification during this period. As part of ethical protocols, strict anonymity policies were adhered to in the study. Therefore, all participants were assured that no personal information would be used in this or any subsequent research endeavours.

3.4.2.1 Valid responses of the research

During the research, quantitative data was collected between February 2023 and October 2023. A total of 328 Chinese international students took part in the survey. After screening, 279 questionnaires were considered valid, leading to an effective

response rate of 86%, with 49 questionnaires being deemed invalid (14%). The primary reasons for excluding questionnaires included substantial missing responses across key items in the scales, as well as patterned responding, such as long sequences of identical answers that could not reflect genuine experiences. Additional criteria for invalidation involved unreasonably short completion times that indicated insufficient engagement, and logical inconsistencies within the responses, including contradictory or implausible answers. Overall, the dataset exhibited minimal missing values, mainly concentrated in specific variables within the primary measurement scales.

Table 3.1 Total number of questionnaires and valid responses

| Category | Numbers of students |
|---------------|---------------------|
| Total surveys | 328 |
| Valid | 279 (85%) |
| Invalid | 49 (15%) |

3.4.3 Qualitative data collection

The qualitative data obtained in this study from the student segment originated from intentional participants in the quantitative research, who were interested and willing to share their intercultural experiences of the classroom. The researcher designed interview questions to elucidate and complement the quantitative findings. Thus, these questions served as supplementary tools, drawing upon information provided by the quantitative survey. The interview questions aimed to explore the intercultural experiences encountered by Chinese international students during their university education. They also sought to identify reasons facilitating and hindering their engagement in communication and interaction in university classrooms with Australian tutors.

The qualitative data obtained in the tutor segment of this study relied partially on snowball sampling through student referrals, where tutors with experience

teaching Chinese international students were recommended. Another portion of the data was acquired through recommendations from mentors and convenience sampling within the university campus. The questions posed to tutors were also based on the questionnaire. Some questions were tailored based on responses from student interviews, particularly focusing on unique and meaningful insights.

As part of the anonymity policy outlined in the human ethics protocol, both students and tutors provided written consent and were informed that each participant will be assigned a unique identifier. This identifier was used to represent them in the study. Additionally, students and tutors had the freedom to withdraw from interviews at any time and for any reason. Ultimately, there were no withdrawals from the study by either students or tutors. The researcher also assured participants that all raw data would be destroyed after the completion of the study.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, following a predetermined outline that was refined for the tutor portion. The outline primarily aimed to explore students' intercultural communicative competence in the classroom and their basic perspectives on knowledge and coping strategies related to intercultural competence (see appendix).

When contacting the interviewees, the researcher typically reached out approximately one week in advance to inform them of the main topics of the interview. This approach ensured that participants were adequately prepared for a more in-depth conversation. Each interviewee's discussion lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour, and with their consent, we recorded the entire session using recording devices such as a digital recorder or a computer. The location of the interview was ultimately determined by the interviewees, demonstrating respect for their preferences and promoting a relaxed atmosphere conducive to genuine expression of thoughts and optimal performance. Additionally, to minimise disruptions from other individuals or external factors, the researcher typically chose quiet and conducive environments for conversation, such as booking library rooms,

offices, or the interviewees' accommodation, where recording quality was not significantly affected.

3.4.4 Demographic profile of Chinese international students

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the Chinese international students participating in this study. It encompasses the key demographic variables including gender, age, current educational level, faculty of study, and self-reported English language proficiency. These characteristics provide a comprehensive picture of Chinese international students

3.4.4.1 Gender distribution

Among the valid responses, gender was categorised as male, female, and “prefer not to answer”.

Table 3.2 Gender distribution

| Gender | Numbers of students |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| Male students | 106 (38%) |
| Female students | 171 (61.3%) |
| Prefer not to say | 2 (0.7%) |

Within the gender response, females constituted the majority, representing 61.3% (n=171) of the total sample. Male participants accounted for 38.0% (n=106). A small number of participants (0.7%, n=2) chose not to disclose their gender.

3.4.4.2 Age distribution

For the age distribution, participants were classified into four age groups: under 22, between 22 and 26, between 26 and 30, and above 30.

Table 3.3 Age distribution

| Ages | Numbers of students |
|---------------|---------------------|
| Under 22 | 136 (49%) |
| Between 22-26 | 131 (47%) |
| Between 26-30 | 10 (3%) |
| Above 30 | 2 (1%) |

The largest proportion of respondents, approximately 48.6%, was aged below 22 years. The next largest group consisted of respondents aged between 22 and 26 years, accounting for 46.8% of the sample. The proportions of respondents aged between 26 and 30 years and above 30 years were relatively small, representing 1.1% and 1.1% respectively.

3.4.4.3 Current study

The participants' educational levels were primarily concentrated in three categories: Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and PhD.

Table 3.4 Current study distribution

| | Numbers of students |
|---------------|---------------------|
| Undergraduate | 170 (41%) |
| Post-graduate | 107 (38%) |
| PhD | 2 (1%) |

As illustrated in Table 3.4, the participants predominantly consisted of undergraduate students (61%, n=170); postgraduate students accounted for a significant proportion at 38% (n=107), while PhD candidates represented only a small fraction (1%, n=2).

Undergraduate education was the most common educational background among the respondents, occupying the largest proportion.

3.4.4.4 Academic disciplines

Based on the participants' self-reported fields of study, their responses were categorised into faculties for analysis.

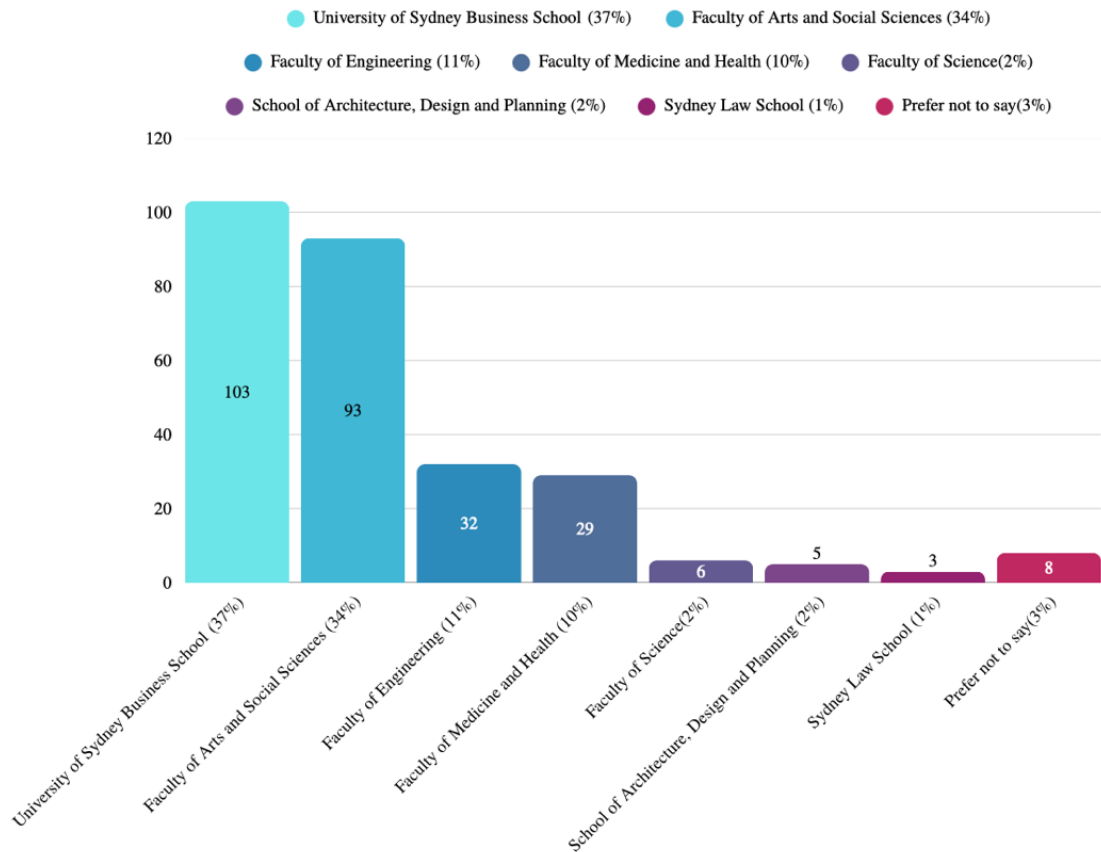


Chart 3.1 Academic discipline distribution

Analysis of the academic discipline distribution for the random sample reveals a pronounced concentration of Chinese international student participants within the Business School, which accounts for the largest proportion (37%) of the sample. A comprehensive review by Zhai et al. (2019), covering 68 studies on the motivations of Chinese international students in choosing courses in Australia, indicates that business-related disciplines have remained highly attractive to Chinese students due to strong career prospects and perceived relevance to the global job market. The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences also report substantial numbers of participants

(34%), reflecting a growing diversification of academic interests beyond business, but still within fields with broad international recognition and employment pathways. Moderate representation is observed in the Faculties of Engineering (11%) and Faculty of Medicine and Health (10%). Although their proportion is not as high as that of business-related disciplines, these fields often reflect China's national development strategies and key areas of research investment (Tian et al., 2021). Students are also attracted by the significant development opportunities recognised by the state. In contrast, the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning (2%), and Law (1%) reported the smallest numbers of participants. These fields typically feature higher entry barriers, stricter language requirements and differences of legal systems. This aligns with the difficulties noted by Zhai et al. (2019), including cultural differences and challenges in social integration. Such factors help explain the relatively limited presence of Chinese international students in these disciplines. This study also takes into account the less commonly represented faculties by allocating a small proportion of Chinese international student interviews to these less popular disciplines.

3.4.4.5 Self-reported English language proficiency

When processing self-reported English language proficiency, this study defined and reduced English levels by referencing Little's (2006) Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). By comparing their reported IELTS, TOEFL, and PTE scores, all reported language proficiency levels were ultimately reduced to three levels (B1, B2, and C1) and an exempt level. According to the mapping between the CEFR and IELTS, both IELTS scores of 5.5 to 6.5 are classified as B2, corresponding to the "Independent User" category. IELTS scores of 7 and above are considered C1, denoting a "Proficient User". Most higher education programs in Australia typically set the minimum English language entry requirement at

IELTS 6.5 (B2), while a small number of disciplines require an IELTS score of 7 (C1).

Table 3.5 Language distribution

| Languages | Numbers of students |
|-----------|---------------------|
| Level B1 | 1 (0.5%) |
| Level B2 | 118 (42.3%) |
| Level B3 | 77 (27.5%) |
| Exempts | 30 (10.7%) |
| N/A | 53 (19%) |

Participants' self-reported English language proficiency was primarily concentrated at the B2 and C1 levels. Specifically, only one student (0.05%) rated their proficiency as B1, while as many as 118 participants (42.3%) identified as B2 users, making this the largest group within the sample. Seventy-seven students (27.5%) assessed themselves at the C1 level, indicating that, while English is used effectively in most situations, inaccuracies, inappropriateness, and misunderstandings may still occur in certain contexts. Additionally, 32 participants (19%) selected "Exempt", which typically indicates that they had studied in an English-speaking country for more than one year and were therefore not required to provide English test scores.

3.5 Data analysis

Prior to formal analysis, the researcher conducted a rigorous data-cleaning process on the collected questionnaire responses. For missing values where the proportion of missing data was very low (typically less than 5%), the sample mean for each respective variable was used for imputation. This approach helped maintain the overall mean and preserve the integrity of the analytic sample (Laaksonen, 2018). Subsequently, questionnaires were systematically sorted and screened based on completeness, logical consistency, and the requirements of the research

design. Incomplete, logically inconsistent, or invalid responses were excluded to ensure the representativeness and quality of the final analytical sample.

3.5.1 Quantitative data analysis

Upon the collection of survey responses and data being cleaned up, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was first conducted using SPSS to examine the potential structure of the intercultural competence scale. Although the questionnaire items were informed by established intercultural competence scales, the instrument was substantially adapted to the Australian classroom context and reorganised under an adapted Deardorff (2006) framework. Given the contextual specificity and the exploratory aim of identifying latent sub-dimensions within affective, knowledge, and behavioural domains, EFA was considered more appropriate than CFA at this stage (Hair et al., 2019).

EFA was conducted separately for the affective, knowledge, and behavioural sections. Principal component analysis was used as the extraction method, followed by Varimax rotation to enhance interpretability. Prior to factor extraction, sampling adequacy was assessed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity. Factor retention was guided by eigenvalues greater than 1.0, inspection of scree plots, and theoretical interpretability. Items with factor loadings below 0.40 or with substantial cross-loadings were considered for removal.

Following the validation of the measurement instrument, descriptive statistical analyses and regression analyses were conducted using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were first computed using the Descriptives module to obtain means and standard deviations for each intercultural competence factor. Multiple regression analyses were then performed to examine potential predictors of intercultural competence development. Intercultural competence factor scores and overall scores served as dependent variables, while demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, and academic level), self-reported English proficiency, and personality traits were entered as independent variables using the enter method. This approach allowed for the

simultaneous examination of the unique contribution of each predictor while controlling for the effects of the others. Regression coefficients (β) and significance levels were examined to determine which variables significantly predicted intercultural competence levels within the sample.

3.5.2 Reliability and validity

3.5.2.1 Reliability

Reliability statistics provide information about the internal consistency of a measurement instrument. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is used to assess the reliability of the instrument. The value of 0.946 indicates a high level of internal consistency, suggesting that the items in the instrument are strongly correlated with each other. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient based on standardised items is 0.949, which also indicates a high level of internal consistency. This coefficient is computed after standardising the items, which allows for better comparison and interpretation of the reliability estimates.

The instrument consists of a total of 56 items, indicating the number of individual items included in the analysis.

Table 3.6 Overall reliability of the scale

| | Cronbach's Alpha | Cronbach's Alpha (Standardised) | Number of items |
|-------------|------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Reliability | 0.940 | 0.946 | 56 |

Table 3.7 Reliability retesting for three factors

| Part | Cronbach's Alpha | Standardised Cronbach's Alpha | Number of Items |
|-----------|------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Affective | 0.885 | 0.886 | 23 |
| Knowledge | 0.841 | 0.844 | 13 |

| | | | |
|------------|-------|-------|----|
| Behaviours | 0.896 | 0.900 | 20 |
|------------|-------|-------|----|

3.5.2.2 Validity

Validity is a critical indicator for assessing whether a scale or measurement instrument accurately reflects the concept it is intended to measure (Creswell, 2017). To enhance the validity of the research instruments, it is essential during the design stage to ensure that all items are semantically clear and unambiguous. This approach minimises the risk of confusion between variables and reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation by respondents.

First, the three factors of the scales utilised in this study have a history of widespread application in previous research, with items adapted from established intercultural competence instruments. Additionally, prior to distributing the questionnaire, content validity was strengthened by inviting several experts in intercultural education, as well as teachers and students with experience studying in Australia, to review the instrument. Drawing on their classroom interaction experiences, multiple rounds of revisions were conducted to refine the items. This process not only enhanced the representativeness of the items but also ensured comprehensive coverage and depth across the three factors— affective, knowledge, and behavioural.

Construct validity was examined through statistical analyses to determine whether each factor accurately reflected the underlying theoretical structure. EFA were employed. After the KMO measure and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity were first conducted to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis. An iterative EFA procedure was adopted. The first rotation was conducted to examine the initial factor structure and identify ambiguous or weakly loading items. Following the removal of items that did not meet the loading criteria or exhibited cross-loadings, a second EFA with rotation was performed to confirm and refine the factor structure. Subsequently, attention was given to factor loadings, with standardised loadings greater than 0.40

considered indicative of satisfactory convergent validity for each construct factor.

Through these procedures, this study systematically enhanced scale validity at the stages of design, expert review, and statistical validation. Content validity ensured the comprehensiveness and representativeness of items within each factor, while construct validity confirmed the theoretical structure's alignment with empirical data, thereby providing a robust foundation for subsequent analyses.

Table 3.8 KMO and Bartlett's Test for affective part

| KMO and Bartlett's Test for affective part | |
|--|----------|
| KMO | 0.887 |
| Approx. Chi-Square | 2869.635 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 351 |
| Significance | .000 |

Table 3.9 KMO and Bartlett's Test for knowledge part

| KMO and Bartlett's Test for knowledge part | |
|--|----------|
| KMO | 0.854 |
| Approx. Chi-Square | 1221.582 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 91 |
| Significance | .000 |

Table 3.10 KMO and Bartlett's Test for behaviour part

| KMO and Bartlett's Test for behaviour part | |
|--|----------|
| KMO | 0.910 |
| Approx. Chi-Square | 2475.507 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 210 |
| Significance | .000 |

Before conducting EFA, the KMO and Bartlett's Tests were conducted for

three parts of the data: affective, knowledge, and behavioural. For the affective part, the KMO value was 0.887, indicating a high degree of sampling adequacy, and the Bartlett's Test was significant ($\chi^2=2869.635$, $df=351$, $p< .001$), suggesting that the correlations between variables were sufficiently large for factor analysis. Similarly, for the knowledge part, the KMO value was 0.854, and the Bartlett's test was significant ($\chi^2=1221.582$, $df=91$, $p< .001$), indicating suitability for factor analysis. Lastly, for the behaviour part, the KMO value was 0.910, indicating high sampling adequacy, and the Bartlett's test was significant ($\chi^2=2475.507$, $df=210$, $p< .001$), suggesting appropriateness for factor analysis. Overall, the results suggest that the data are suitable for factor analysis across all three parts of the study.

Exploratory factor analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) is a multivariate statistical technique employed to identify the latent structure of a set of items, thereby clarifying the extent to which each item is associated with particular factors. The primary objective of conducting EFA on this questionnaire is to validate the factors and individual items within its three major sections: the affective, knowledge, and behavioural components.

In this study, EFA is applied separately to each of these sections to determine whether the items cluster as theoretically expected and to identify any underlying sub-factors. This approach ensures that each section represents a coherent construct, enables the identification of meaningful sub-factors, and facilitates the refinement of weak or cross-loading items. Together, these processes strengthen the construct validity of the measurement instrument.

Results of affective EFA

Table 3.11 Variance explained and eigenvalues for affective part

| Factors | Eigenvalues | Variance percentages (%) | Cumulative percentages (%) |
|---------|-------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | 6.704 | 29.149 | 29.149 |

| | | | |
|---|-------|-------|--------|
| 2 | 2.307 | 10.03 | 39.179 |
| 3 | 1.806 | 7.852 | 47.031 |
| 4 | 1.323 | 5.752 | 52.783 |

Table 3.12 EFA of affective factor after the first rotation

| Item | Components | | | |
|--------|------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Q18-1 | | | | 0.492 |
| Q18-2 | 0.501 | | | |
| Q18-3 | 0.435 | 0.561 | | |
| Q18-4 | | 0.766 | | |
| Q18-5 | | 0.751 | | |
| Q18-6 | | 0.77 | | |
| Q18-7 | | 0.637 | | |
| Q18-8 | 0.56 | | | |
| Q18-9 | 0.712 | | | |
| Q18-10 | 0.695 | | | |
| Q18-11 | 0.534 | | | |
| Q18-12 | 0.788 | | | |
| Q18-13 | | | | 0.535 |
| Q18-14 | | | 0.506 | |
| Q18-15 | | | 0.41 | |
| Q18-16 | | 0.452 | | |
| Q18-17 | | | 0.534 | |
| Q18-18 | | | 0.575 | |
| Q18-19 | | | 0.525 | |
| Q18-20 | | | 0.562 | |
| Q18-21 | | | 0.639 | |
| Q18-22 | | | 0.636 | |
| Q18-23 | | 0.402 | | |
| Q18-24 | | | | 0.62 |
| Q18-25 | | | | 0.794 |
| Q18-26 | | | 0.532 | |
| Q18-27 | | | | 0.719 |

Table 3.13 EFA of affective factor after the second rotation

| Item | Components | | | |
|--------|------------|---------------|---------|--------------------|
| | Attitude | Proactiveness | Empathy | Affective adaption |
| | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Q18-2 | 0.512 | | | |
| Q18-4 | 0.749 | | | |
| Q18-5 | 0.783 | | | |
| Q18-6 | 0.808 | | | |
| Q18-7 | 0.641 | | | |
| Q18-16 | 0.472 | | | |
| Q18-8 | | 0.607 | | |
| Q18-9 | | 0.747 | | |
| Q18-10 | | 0.743 | | |
| Q18-11 | | 0.558 | | |
| Q18-12 | | 0.755 | | |
| Q18-13 | | 0.578 | | |
| Q18-14 | | | 0.506 | |
| Q18-17 | | | 0.581 | |
| Q18-18 | | | 0.586 | |
| Q18-19 | | | 0.513 | |
| Q18-20 | | | 0.538 | |
| Q18-21 | | | 0.668 | |
| Q18-22 | | | 0.688 | |
| Q18-24 | | | | 0.645 |
| Q18-25 | | | | 0.802 |
| Q18-26 | | | | 0.603 |
| Q18-27 | | | | 0.721 |

Consistent with the research design, Table 3.11 shows that four factors were extracted for the affective factor, each with an eigenvalue greater than 1. These factors cumulatively explain 52.78% of the total variance. This meets the standard criteria in psychometric research, indicating that the extracted factors possess satisfactory explanatory power and structural validity.

Table 3.12 presents the results after the first rotation. Most items exhibited primary loadings above 0.40, which aligns with the conventional retention threshold in EFA, demonstrating strong associations between questionnaire items and their respective factors. The rotated factor solution further elucidated the substructure within the affective factor, resulting in four interpretable sub-factors: attitude, proactiveness, empathy, and affective adaptation. Most items loaded clearly onto a single factor, with minimal cross-loading, except for Q18-3, which was subsequently excluded.

The second rotation analysis (Table 3.13) was conducted after removing ambiguous items such as Q18-3, as well as less representative items including Q18-1, Q18-15, and Q18-23. This process verified the four sub-factors under the affective factor. Through this exploratory process, the researcher adjusted the classification of certain items, confirming that the subdivision of affective sub-factors within intercultural competence is both theoretically and empirically justified.

Knowledge part EFA results

Table 3.14 Variance explained and eigenvalues for knowledge part

| Factors | Eigenvalues | Variance percentages (%) | Cumulative percentages (%) |
|---------|-------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | 4.723 | 36.329 | 36.329 |
| 2 | 1.25 | 9.618 | 45.947 |
| 3 | 1.091 | 8.39 | 54.337 |

Table 3.15 EFA of knowledge factor after the first rotation

| Item | Components | | |
|--------|------------|-------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Q19-1 | | | 0.781 |
| Q19-2 | 0.503 | | |
| Q19-3 | | | 0.512 |
| Q19-4 | | 0.501 | |
| Q19-5 | | | 0.721 |
| Q19-6 | | | 0.765 |
| Q19-7 | | 0.573 | |
| Q19-8 | | 0.756 | |
| Q19-9 | 0.655 | | |
| Q19-10 | 0.606 | | |
| Q19-11 | 0.662 | | |
| Q19-12 | 0.72 | | |
| Q19-13 | | | 0.699 |
| Q19-14 | | | 0.54 |

Table 3.16 EFA of knowledge factor after the second rotation

| Item | Components | | |
|--------|-------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | Communication awareness | Language Capacity | Cultural Difference |
| | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Q19-1 | 0.819 | | |
| Q19-3 | 0.536 | | |
| Q19-5 | 0.563 | | |
| Q19-6 | 0.515 | | |
| Q19-14 | 0.517 | | |
| Q19-11 | | 0.505 | |
| Q19-7 | | 0.816 | |
| Q19-8 | | 0.875 | |
| Q19-9 | | | 0.554 |
| Q19-2 | | | 0.531 |
| Q19-10 | | | 0.604 |
| Q19-12 | | | 0.809 |
| Q19-13 | | | 0.669 |

The results of the EFA for the knowledge factor demonstrate a clear and interpretable latent structure. As shown in Table 3.14, three factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted, cumulatively explaining 54.34% of the total variance. This level of explained variance suggests that the factor solution is both robust and theoretically meaningful.

The initial rotated solution (Table 3.15) revealed that most items exhibited primary loadings above 0.40 on their respective factors, confirming that the items are well-aligned with their intended constructs. There were no notable cross-loadings, indicating good discriminant validity among the extracted factors. Following the removal of the less representative item Q19-4 after the first rotation, a second factor analysis was conducted. As shown in Table 3.16, this second rotation further clarified the factor structure. The sub-factors within the knowledge domain emerged as Communication Awareness, Language Capacity, and Cultural Difference. Each sub-factor is supported by multiple items with substantial loadings, all item exceeding 0.50 and highest reached 0.87, reflecting strong item-factor associations. The clear separation and coherence of these factors affirm the construct validity of the knowledge component of the scale.

Behaviours EFA results

Table 3.17 Variance explained and eigenvalues for behaviour part

| Factor | Eigenvalues | Variance percentages (%) | Cumulative percentages (%) |
|--------|-------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | 6.745 | 37.474 | 37.474 |
| 2 | 1.706 | 9.476 | 46.95 |
| 3 | 1.435 | 7.973 | 54.923 |
| 4 | 1.067 | 5.373 | 60.296 |

Table 3.18 EFA of behaviour factor after the first rotation

| Item | Components | | | |
|--------|------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Q20-1 | | | 0.633 | 0.413 |
| Q20-2 | 0.776 | | | |
| Q20-3 | | | 0.586 | |
| Q20-4 | 0.687 | | | |
| Q20-5 | 0.623 | | | |
| Q20-6 | | 0.508 | | |
| Q20-7 | | 0.734 | | |
| Q20-8 | | 0.671 | | |
| Q20-9 | | 0.714 | | |
| Q20-10 | | 0.741 | | |
| Q20-11 | | | 0.739 | |
| Q20-12 | | | 0.63 | |
| Q20-13 | 0.481 | | | |
| Q20-14 | | | | 0.684 |
| Q20-15 | | | 0.627 | |
| Q20-16 | | | | 0.556 |
| Q20-17 | | | | 0.621 |
| Q20-18 | | | | 0.705 |
| Q20-19 | | | | 0.716 |
| Q20-20 | | | | 0.574 |
| Q20-21 | | | | 0.589 |

Table 3.19 EFA of behaviour factor after the second rotation

| Item | Components | | | |
|--------|-------------|--------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| | Flexibility | Language use | Communication Sensitivity | Behaviour Norms |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Q20-2 | 0.734 | | | |
| Q20-4 | 0.563 | | | |
| Q20-5 | 0.687 | | | |
| Q20-13 | 0.521 | | | |
| Q20-6 | | 0.663 | | |
| Q20-7 | | 0.796 | | |
| Q20-8 | | 0.761 | | |
| Q20-9 | | 0.641 | | |
| Q20-10 | | 0.714 | | |
| Q20-3 | | | 0.621 | |
| Q20-11 | | | 0.739 | |
| Q20-12 | | | 0.63 | |
| Q20-15 | | | 0.627 | |
| Q20-14 | | | | 0.684 |
| Q20-16 | | | | 0.556 |
| Q20-17 | | | | 0.621 |
| Q20-18 | | | | 0.705 |
| Q20-19 | | | | 0.716 |
| Q20-20 | | | | 0.574 |
| Q20-21 | | | | 0.589 |

The results of the EFA for the behavioural factor reveal a well-structured and interpretable latent construct. Four factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted, cumulatively accounting for 60.30% of the total variance. This level of explained variance surpasses the commonly accepted standard in social sciences, indicating that the factor solution is both statistically sound and theoretically meaningful.

The initial rotation results (Table 3.18) reveal that the majority of items exhibit substantial primary loadings (all above 0.40) on their respective components. This confirms strong item-factor associations and supports the construct validity of the behaviour scale. Following the removal of ambiguous item Q20-1, a second rotation was conducted (Table 3.19). The behavioural factor was clarified into four distinct sub-factors: flexibility, language use, behaviour norms, and communication sensitivity. Each sub-factor is supported by multiple items with high loadings, many exceeding 0.60, which underscores the multidimensional nature of behavioural factors in intercultural contexts.

Overall, the results of the EFA display the initial eigenvalues, variance percentages, and cumulative percentages for each factor. Within each factor, tables present the correlation coefficients between each item and component, as well as the adjusted results after two rotations. Through EFA, the researcher adjusted the classification of certain items. The subdivision of sub-factors under affective, knowledge, and behavioural domains for the intercultural competence scale of Chinese international students was deemed rational.

3.5.3 Qualitative data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis for the qualitative data collected from both the open-ended questionnaire items and the interviews, aiming to further explore issues of intercultural competence identified through the survey. This approach enables both the induction of new themes and the integration of a priori theoretical dimensions into the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The analytic process involved: (1) an initial reading and organisation of the data, (2) open coding to extract meaningful units from the text, (3) clustering codes into thematic categories, and (4) iterative reviewing, merging, and refining of themes to form a clear and interpretable thematic structure. Analytic memos were also composed throughout the process to enhance transparency and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Regarding the open-ended questionnaire questions, the researcher systematically reviewed all responses to items such as “the most difficult course” and “the most challenging aspects of interacting with tutors in class”. These responses were then categorised into subthemes related to intercultural interactions. Each independent idea was recorded on an index card and then grouped by semantic similarity. The preliminary themes distilled from this process were subsequently mapped onto the three theoretical factors of this study’s framework.

For the interviews, upon completion of all recordings, the audio files were transcribed verbatim, with repeated listening to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. Once transcription was finalised, the data were imported into NVivo 12 for thematic analysis. The process began with open coding, assigning initial labels to content at the sentence or paragraph level. These codes were then clustered according to the three core factors of intercultural competence, with space for new subthemes to emerge naturally. For example, the affective factor included subthemes such as positive attitudes, negative attitudes, proactive engagement, empathy, active emotional adaptation, and passive emotional adaptation. The knowledge factor encompassed issues such as limited English vocabulary, listening difficulties, lack of awareness of Australian interactive classroom models, and insufficient understanding of classroom interaction norms. The behavioural factor addressed topics including language misuse, experiences of embarrassment under classroom behavioural norms, instances requiring adaptability, and the tension between individualistic and collectivist behaviours.

Analytic memos were maintained within NVivo throughout the process to document the researcher’s reflections and track adjustments to theme development. In the final stage, themes were further refined and merged, with irrelevant codes removed to ensure clarity and coherence of thematic meanings.

3.6 Ethical considerations

This study relied on the voluntary participation of individuals, and questionnaire and interview respondents signed the consent form. Any identifiable identities of participants will remain anonymous or coded to protect them from any harm and maintain their privacy (Boyle & Schmierback, 2023). Many student participants may have experienced emotionally charged periods in previous semesters due to failing a class or communication failures. Therefore, in order to protect their emotions to the greatest extent possible and to avoid recalling painful experiences, if they did not wish to answer they could either not answer or simply withdraw. All participants were debriefed prior to the study to explain the purpose of the study, in which case no deception would be used (Boyle & Schmierback, 2023).

The interview component of this study involved only two stakeholder groups at the University of Sydney: Chinese international students and Australian tutors. Interviews with Chinese students were conducted in Mandarin, aligning with their language preference and respecting their first language, which enhances data quality and ethical rigour (Schembri & Jašić, 2022). Australian tutors could choose to be interviewed in either English or Mandarin, based on their individual linguistic comfort. This language selection serves several ethical purposes. First, it promotes language-based power equity, mitigating the dominance of English and ensuring participants are not disadvantaged by linguistic barriers. Second, it preserves cultural and semantic authenticity, reducing the risk of meaning loss during translation and honouring participants' expressions. Third, it reinforces informed consent and comprehension, as participants clearly understand they can use the language in which they feel most at ease. This helps ensure transparency regarding study aims, data usage, and withdrawal rights (Boyle & Schmierback, 2023).

Furthermore, this study acknowledges the potential influence of researcher positionality, assumptions, and advocacy on the research process and outcomes.

Reflexive practices are embedded throughout the research design, recognising that the researcher may simultaneously occupy insider–outsider roles, which could shape interview questioning, data interpretation, and analytical perspectives (Yip, 2024).

To mitigate potential researcher bias arising from positionality and assumptions, three interlocking strategies are deployed. First, a quantitatively driven design is utilised: initial survey results inform the development of the qualitative interview guide. This top-down approach helps ensure that interviews reflect empirical trends rather than researcher preconceptions, thereby reducing framing bias in question formulation (Creswell, 2017).

Second, the researcher regularly shared emerging findings with the supervisory team and engaged in ongoing reflexivity practices. At the same time, methodological triangulation, particularly through the integration of quantitative analysis, was employed to eliminate potential individual subjectivities and biases. Qualitative data from Chinese international students and Australian tutors were used complementarily to avoid reliance on a single perspective and to reduce the risk of misrepresentation or overgeneralisation of participants' experiences. For each research question, student and tutor data were cross-examined to ensure that interpretations of classroom interaction and intercultural competence development were not solely based on self-report. This approach helped to minimise potential bias, particularly when interpreting sensitive issues such as classroom participation, cultural misunderstanding, and perceived disengagement. By integrating student and tutor voices, the study ensured that findings reflected perspective of interactional rather than attributing challenges to any single group.

Third, during the data analysis phase, a dual coding strategy, employing both deductive and inductive coding, was adopted. Deductive codes, grounded in theory and quantitative findings, provided structural organisation, while inductive codes emerged organically from the data, allowing new themes to surface. Concurrently, negative-case analysis was used systematically to identify instances that contradict

main themes or assumptions, thereby testing the robustness and sufficiency of analytic claims

3.7 Summary of the chapter

This chapter delineated a comprehensive research design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to investigate the intercultural competence of Chinese international students and their interactions with Australian tutors. The research utilised a mixed-method approach, starting with a structured questionnaire to collect quantitative data followed by semi-structured interviews for qualitative insights. This dual approach ensured robust data collection and analysis, capturing a wide range of intercultural interactions and experiences. Key steps included the deployment of various instruments such as surveys and interviews, rigorous data collection involving both student and tutor participants, and meticulous data analysis to ensure reliability and validity. The study also adhered to ethical standards throughout the research process. Overall, the data gathered offered a granular view of the demographic characteristics and intercultural competencies of the participants, providing a solid foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of intercultural communication within this educational context.

The mean score of the overall intercultural competence scale is 3.863, reflecting the average rating given by Chinese international students across various factors of competence, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. The standard deviation, with the value of 0.782, indicates a notable degree of variability in the dataset.

Table 3.20 Overall intercultural competence

| | Mean | Std deviation |
|----------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Overall intercultural competence | 3.796 | 0.782 |

Among the overall scores, the item “I often initiate discussions with my tutor in class” received the lowest mean score of 3.16, indicating that students are generally

reluctant to take the initiative in classroom interactions. This suggests that proactiveness represents their greatest challenge, particularly within the Australian discussion-based teaching context, where active participation is expected. In contrast, the highest mean score of 4.45 was recorded for the item “I carefully deal with cultural differences”, reflecting students’ strong respect for cultural diversity and their adherence to Confucian values that emphasise harmony, caution, and deference in intercultural interactions.

Chapter 4 Affective factors of Chinese international students' intercultural competence

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the first factor of intercultural competence: the affective factor. It provides a detailed report and critical analysis of this factor, which is operationalised through four key components: attitude, proactiveness, empathy and affective adaptation. These areas are systematically investigated to address the following research questions and sub-questions:

RQ 1 What are the affective factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?

RQ 1-1 What are the attitudes of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

RQ 1-2 What are the proactiveness of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

RQ 1-3 What are the empathy of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

RQ 1-4 What are the affective adaptations of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

This chapter reports findings from data from both surveys and interviews from Chinese international students and their tutors. It examines the influence of affective factors in classroom interaction with Australian tutors to provide a holistic understanding and insights for informing intercultural classroom practices.

This chapter comprises four sections. The first section serves as an introduction, outlining the overall structure of this chapter. Section 2 presents findings to quantitative data by analysing the current intercultural competence of Chinese international students in terms of their affective aspects within Australian classrooms. It also highlights the issues faced by these students when interacting

with tutors from an affective perspective.

Section 3 delves into findings from qualitative data collected through interviews with the Chinese international students and their tutors. It reports how affective factors have influenced Chinese international students in the development of intercultural competence. Furthermore, findings from interviews with their tutors will be presented to see opportunities and potential strategies for fostering affective factors in supporting Chinese international students within the host educational environment.

Section 4 presents a summary to recap the key findings of affective factors and opportunities for Chinese international students to develop their intercultural competence.

4.2 Findings from the survey

This section reports the affective factors of Chinese international students from quantitative analysis, highlighting the challenges and deficiencies they face in Australian classrooms. Four areas of affective factors have been revealed from the data below.

Table 4.1 Chinese international students' affective factors

| | Chinese international students' affective factors | | |
|----------------------|---|---------------|----------|
| | Mean | Std deviation | Variance |
| Attitude | 4.01 | 0.57 | 0.33 |
| Proactiveness | 3.58 | 0.68 | 0.47 |
| Empathy | 3.82 | 0.49 | 0.23 |
| Affective adaptation | 3.51 | 0.74 | 0.55 |

4.2.1 Attitude

Among the four factors in Table 4.1, attitude received the highest average score (M=4.01, SD=0.57), indicating that most Chinese international students expressed a positive and respectful disposition toward their tutors and classroom interactions in

the Australian context. For example, responses to item 2, “I am willing to listen to their perspectives when interacting with tutors”, showed a high level of acceptance (M=4.24; 93.08% confidence), reflecting students’ openness to different viewpoints and showing respect to their tutors.

Regression analyses revealed that attitude was not significantly differentiated by gender, although male students reported a slightly higher mean score (3.72) compared to female students (3.69). As age increased, age was positively associated with more favourable attitudes ($\beta=.118$, $p<.05$), suggesting that older students developed more constructive orientations toward tutors. Self-reported personality traits also played a role, with extroversion predicting more positive attitudes.

Furthermore, language proficiency also influenced Chinese international students’ attitudes. At Level B2 (52% of participants), students demonstrated only average levels of intercultural engagement, with a generally positive but cautious stance toward tutors. At Level C1 (34%), participants reported stronger openness and flexibility, indicating greater confidence in expressing positive attitudes during classroom interaction. Students classified as Exempt (13%), who had prior study experiences in English-speaking environments, scored the highest in attitude, benefiting from both linguistic fluency and cultural familiarity.

4.2.2 Proactiveness

In contrast, many Chinese international students exhibited lower proactiveness (M=3.58, SD=0.68), a common concern that was also corroborated by tutors in the qualitative data. Item 10, “I often take the initiative to discuss questions with tutors in class”, revealed a substantial lack of initiative (M=3.16; 41.81% confidence), suggesting that passive proactiveness continues to hinder students’ ability to engage effectively in classroom discourse. These findings were further explored in qualitative data.

Regression analyses identified several patterns. While there was no significant gender effect, age had a significant positive effect ($\beta=.154$, $p<.01$), with older students demonstrating greater initiative in engaging with tutors. Educational attainment was also associated with higher proactiveness ($\beta=.139$, $p<.01$), reflecting that postgraduate students were generally more proactive than undergraduates. Personality played a particularly strong role, with extroversion showing the highest predictive value for proactiveness ($\beta=.252$, $p<0.01$).

Language proficiency further differentiated proactiveness. At B2 level, students could interact with tutors with reasonable fluency but often refrained from initiating classroom discussions. At C1 level, greater linguistic flexibility supported more active participation, though personal learning histories continued to shape behaviour. Exempt students reported the strongest initiative, benefiting from both advanced language proficiency and familiarity with academic norms in English-speaking settings.

4.2.3 Empathy

In terms of empathy, Chinese international students expressed moderate confidence in their ability to understand and respect cultural differences in classroom interaction from their tutors' perspective.

Although no substantial gender differences were observed, results revealed a decline in empathy among students aged 26 to 30. This reduction may be linked to increased life pressures at this stage, including career planning, personal aspirations, and role strain. In the Chinese context, the cultural expectation of “establishing oneself by the age of 30” may shift students' priorities away from empathic engagement, thereby reducing their capacity for perspective-taking.

Personality traits and language proficiency also influenced empathy, though less strongly than in the domains of attitude and proactiveness. Students with higher extroversion reported moderately stronger empathy, while those with higher levels of

language proficiency demonstrated more consistent intercultural understanding. However, the variability across groups indicates that empathy is particularly sensitive to broader life circumstances and individual differences.

4.2.4 Affective adaptation

For affective adaptation, Chinese international students reported the lowest confidence on average ($M=3.51$, $SD=0.68$), suggesting that Chinese international students were somewhat confident in their ability to understand and respect cultural differences from their tutors' perspectives, though this competence was not consistently high across all participants. For example, item 23 "I feel no barriers and have a sense of belonging when I interact with my tutor" ($M=3.19$, $SD=1.03$) is the lowest item within this component. This indicates a significant challenge in emotional adjustment and experience of stress when adapting to the Australian classroom. The following interview data also validate the common concerns including anxiety over differences in educational systems, fear of expressing ideas openly, unfamiliar classroom norms, difficulty adapting to new learning environments, and uncertainty surrounding differing values. These issues will be discussed in detail in the qualitative findings section.

Regression analyses further elaborated on these findings. Educational attainment showed an unstable pattern: adaptation improved at undergraduate and postgraduate levels but declined among PhD students, possibly due to heightened academic pressures and isolation. Personality was again influential, with extroversion positively predicting adaptation ($\beta=.159$, $p<.01$). Language proficiency emerged as a critical factor, with students at higher levels—particularly those exempt from English requirements—reporting the strongest adaptation scores. These results confirm that linguistic competence provides a necessary foundation for emotional adjustment, though language alone cannot resolve all adaptation challenges

Language proficiency had the strongest association with affective adaptation. At the B2 level, students demonstrated only basic adjustment, while those at C1 level reported greater flexibility in adapting to classroom norms. Exempt students demonstrate the highest affective adaptation, reflecting not only advanced language skills but also prior experience in English-speaking academic environments. These results confirm that linguistic competence provides a necessary foundation for emotional adjustment, though language alone cannot resolve all adaptation challenges.

In addition, it is interesting that personality exerted the most significant influence across all four affective factors. Extroversion consistently predicted stronger performance across all four components, reinforcing the role of personality in intercultural engagement. Educational attainment was linked to higher proactiveness and improved adaptation during undergraduate and postgraduate stages, but a decline was observed among PhD students, reflecting the unique pressures of advanced study.

The results highlight both the strengths and challenges of Chinese international students among the affective factors. The following qualitative analysis seeks insight from these survey results to understand how Chinese international students and their tutors perceive these affective factors in classroom interactions and how they are negotiated in practice.

4.3 Findings from interviews

4.3.1 Attitudes

Interview data reveals that Chinese international students in Australia respect their tutors and Australian culture, but often experience a transformative journey from passive to positive towards classroom interactions. As these students transition from the traditional educational setting in China to the more interactive classrooms in Australia, they are willing to respect and adopt a more open-minded approach.

This shift is vividly illustrated by Chinese international students' reflections on the freedom they have experienced in Australian classrooms. This relaxed classroom culture not only increases their willingness to accept the new culture and engage with classroom activities but also sparks a desire to openly share ideas with their tutors. This section of the report focuses on Chinese international students' communicative attitude with tutors, their engagement in the classroom, and their overall learning experience.

From students: eager to understand the new culture

In the interview, most Chinese students expressed a generally positive attitude and respect toward Australian culture and classroom interactions. They are eager to understand the new culture as Student 17 described:

我觉得就是应该要去了解一下这个地方的文化，就是澳洲这边他们在课堂上平常的交流是什么样的？就这不单单说是你在一个地方学习，要知道什么东西对他们来说是他们习以为常的什么东西是他们不太认同的互动方式，避免一些不必要的误会。 [I think we still need to understand the culture here. Like, what's the usual way they communicate in classrooms in Australia? It's not just about studying in a place; you need to know what's normal for them, what they're used to, and what might seem odd to them in terms of interaction. That way, you can avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.] (Student 17, October 20, 2023)

Moreover, most Chinese international students reported they display high appreciation and value the new classroom culture, because the free environment motivates them to be willing to talk to their tutors. Student 11 reported the biggest difference in the classroom between China and Australia was the “freedom” in the classroom, which motivates her to engage and explore:

在这边我觉得和中国最大的不同就是觉得课堂很自由，让我比较想去接触。 [*Over here [in Australia], I feel the biggest difference from China is that the classes feel really free, which makes me more willing to engage.*] (Student 11, October 17, 2023)

Students reported that upon arriving in Australia they experienced a noticeable shift in classroom culture and structure which stimulated a desire for more active communication.

From students: acceptance and openness to a new culture

A number of students expressed that they felt more accepting of the new culture which was the motive to come to Australia. For example, Student 16 mentioned that before coming to Australia, she had attended a summer camp and visited Australian universities. These experiences gave her an initial impression of Australian culture, sparked her inspiration, and motivated her to study in Australia.

那个时候（夏令营）我就觉得他们课堂上大家的相处，老师和同学之间的相处模式就很平等很轻松。然后玩着玩着就学到了很多新知识，大家就是对不同的文化也比较感兴趣。所以那个时候我就觉得，这样的课堂氛围是很不错的。我就想着以后我也一定要来这边上学 [*Back then [during the summer camp], I felt that the way everyone interacted in class, the relationship between teachers and students, was really equal and relaxed. While having fun, I also learned a lot of new things, and everyone was interested in different cultures. So, at that time, I felt that this kind of classroom atmosphere was really good. I thought to myself, “I definitely want to come here to study in the future”.*] (Student 16, October 20, 2023)

Student 7 also expressed a positive attitude in acceptance towards the Australian culture and educational environment. Similar to Student 7, Student 16, as a TESOL student, emphasised the inherently multicultural nature of Australian classrooms from an educational perspective. She also noted the inclusion and tolerance within Australian education toward mistakes.

澳洲它本身就是一个很多元多样化的，因为来到澳洲，你会感觉世界各地的人本来就是一个文化交融。我就发现在课堂上讨论的时候有时候他们回答错误了之后也没事，甚至还有可能发现新的角度呢。 [Australia itself is very diverse, because it's like a melting pot of people from all over the world. I've noticed in class discussions that even when someone gives a wrong answer, it's totally fine. Sometimes it even leads to a new perspective, you never know.] (Student 7, October 12, 2023)

The students described a culturally integrated backdrop that provided a more forgiving environment for their academic activities. In such a setting, even if students make mistakes in academic expression, they are not subjected to harsh criticism. This flexibility might encourage them to more freely express their views, even if they are making initial attempts or exploring unknown areas. The students noted that even incorrect answers might lead to new perspectives, indicating an academically open and exploratory learning culture. Furthermore, students observed that when others interacted with tutors, mistakes are seen as part of the learning process rather than as obstacles. This perspective is crucial for the Chinese international students to develop their intercultural competence in a new environment.

Findings reveal that most students' acceptance towards different classroom cultures serves as a key point in facilitating their intercultural competence. They perceive learning and living in diverse cultural backgrounds as interesting and

exciting. Bartel and Giannelloni (2017) in their study also revealed that openness is a positive predictive factor. Therefore, the degree of acceptance is crucial for fostering affective competence among Chinese international students.

From tutors: affective support, sharing different perspectives and encouraging bravery

Many tutors in their interviews indicate a generally affirmative attitude toward Chinese international students. Some tutors expressed their acceptance and expectations for Chinese international students from an educator's perspective. As articulated by Tutor 7 and Tutor 10:

As a tutor, I see it as part of my role to encourage all students, including those from China, to feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives. I genuinely hope to spark curiosity about each other's cultures in the classroom, as this kind of exchange enriches the learning experience for everyone. (Tutor 7, December 15, 2023)

Most tutors show their awareness of the cultural differences and have offered opportunities and support to Chinese international students and encourage them to build their confidence to speak out in class. Tutor 7, as a tutor and professor specialising in evaluating teaching, emphasised points similar to those raised by Student 7, a TESOL student. Both highlighted the multicultural nature of Australian classrooms and the importance of support and inclusiveness in enhancing students' intercultural competence. Moreover, one of the tutors, who comes from the field of film studies, drew on his attention to the details of character portrayal to identify the potential affective challenges faced by Chinese international students. He encouraged student to be more "brave":

I want you to be brave in your learning and I acknowledge that this will be

different for many of you. But part of coming to Australia is being brave and this is a way that we distinguish our teaching and learning, that it's active and interactive. And I want you to have the experience of doing that. And so being brave is part of that. So, I guess that's actually a value as well. I've had some feedback from previous students that they do appreciate that opportunity to build their bravery, which is nice. (Tutor 10, December 9, 2025)

Tutor 10 above indirectly highlights the potential affective factor challenges faced by Chinese students. It can be concluded from the data that most tutors are willing to provide emotional encouragement and support to Chinese international students.

4.3.2 Proactiveness

Chinese international students' proactiveness does not exhibit the same positivity as their attitudes. What they demonstrate is more of an intrinsic drive. In other words, they are highly willing to proactively integrate into Australia's more interactive classrooms. However, their past experiences limit the full expression of this internal drive.

From students: unfamiliarity and embarrassment

Findings showed that many Chinese international students lack proactiveness because of the unfamiliar environment and new cultural atmosphere. Confucian norms of politeness, passive learning habits, and anxiety about giving incorrect answers were identified as key factors contributing to their lack of proactiveness. Some students are worried they will lose face if they make mistakes. Students 2, 4, 12, 18, 20 and 21 express these challenges:

但是就是刚开始（来到澳洲）上课的时候是很纠结，就是不敢张嘴说话就是有一种羞耻感。也可能是由于自己的英语不太好。然后再加上第一

次和外国人沟通的这种感觉就是有一种很陌生的感觉。就是觉得不同的一个种族，感觉像是接触到另一种人。[*When I first started going to class in Australia, I felt really hesitant. I just didn't dare to speak—it felt kind of embarrassing. Maybe it was because my English wasn't that good. And also, it was probably the first time I'd ever talked to foreigners. It just felt really unfamiliar at first. I felt like I was interacting with a completely different group of people, almost like they were a different kind of person.*] (Student 2, October 10, 2023)

[...]首先，你要考虑你的表达是否清晰，是否有足够礼貌。[*...]*first, you'll think about whether your expression will be clear enough, whether your expression will be polite enough.] (Student 4)

我觉得我之前还是会有一种咱们之前的学习的习惯(被动式)，比较喜欢去听，去记笔记而不是去互动。[*I think I still have this habit [passive learning] from before where I prefer to listen and take notes rather than interact.*] (Student 12, October 17, 2023)

我习惯说如果我的答案不是对的，我就不应该说出口。因为如果我一旦说的不是正确的答案，我就会受到指责。然后这种指责就会让我觉得在课堂上好丢人，为什么要做这样的事情呢？[*I got used to thinking that if my answer isn't right, I shouldn't say it out loud because if I give the wrong answer, I'll get criticised. And that kind of criticism makes me feel embarrassed in class, like, why did I even say that?*] (Student 20, October 23, 2023)

我个人认为沟通中最大的问题其实还是这种文化的差异。怎么说呢，我们东方文化比较内敛这种感觉，然后呢，这种内敛呢，就会让我们比较沉默，我们倾向于不要过多打扰别人的话。然后呢，我们也倾向于不要过度

地发表自己的意见。 [*Personally, I think the biggest issue in communication is actually the cultural differences. You know, in Eastern culture, we tend to be more reserved, and that reserve makes us quieter. We're inclined not to disturb others too much and not to express our opinions too strongly.*] (Student 21, October 25, 2023)

Chinese international students often experience a sense of “Jiujie” (torn feelings), characterised by hesitancy and embarrassment when speaking in class. A passive learning mode still persists among Chinese international students. This is largely due to traditional educational practices in China, which emphasise rote memorisation and passive knowledge reception, positioning students primarily as listeners and note-takers (Xu, 2022a). When transitioning to Western educational environments where active class participation, critical thinking, and interactive engagement are prioritised, this habitual passivity may lead to discomfort and difficulties in adaptation, consequently affecting students’ proactiveness in classroom settings. Additionally, Confucian cultural influences, which emphasise deep respect for authority, further inhibit these students from speaking freely or questioning tutors openly (Liang & Matthews, 2023). For many Chinese international students, studying in Australia represents their first extended interaction with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, making it feel challenging in classroom interactions. Similarly, consistent with the findings of Su et al. (2013), feelings of shame experienced during interactions are one of the factors contributing to emotional suppression among Chinese international students. Notably, these students often perceive emotional suppression as an adaptive strategy rather than merely a risk factor.

From students: openness or resistance to conflict views

Findings also reveal that Chinese international students are willing to accept different cultural values but they tend to adopt a mentality of avoidance when it

comes to cultural conflicts in classrooms. Most of them often refrain from expressing their opinions openly, preferring instead to maintain harmony and avoid potential confrontation in order to protect themselves. As a result, they may choose to remain silent rather than engage in discussions that could lead to disagreement or conflict. For example, Students 11 and 13 explained they adopted that strategy when facing cultural conflicts in order to protect themselves. They were aware of political issues and different views between China and Australia, so became very careful in their classrooms, as Student 11 stated,

首先要从就是要在心理上做好准备，课堂上肯定会有就是价值观的一些差别。毕竟东方文化和西方文化是有差别的。我反正是能避免就尽量避免。不会想去争辩。一方面是保护好自己，二也不知道课堂上会不会有坏人什么的。 [First off, you need mentally to prepare yourself. There'll definitely be some differences in views, you know what I mean? 'Cause let's face it, Eastern and Western cultures are different. I just try to avoid conflicts if I can, you know? I don't want to argue. It's partly about looking after yourself and partly 'cause who knows if there are bad vibes in classrooms, right?]

(Student 11, October 17, 2023)

Some other students agreed with him; they did not want to express their personal views on sensitive issues and ideologies in classrooms. So, they did not want to engage in the debates, and they put their personal safety as their priority, and worried about their grades if they disagree with their tutors' ideology. One of the participants stated,

比如在课堂上有一些政治问题上的看法，他们是会比较偏西方或者说什么的，当然我们可能作为，就是说东方或者说是不同的 ideology 这种。这种情况下的话，他的看法可能会跟他有很多不同，有些时候会觉得不

理解，有些时候可能会觉得他甚至可能会是在讽刺这些。有这种冲突的话，我会回避不去讨论，他们说他们的，听不听是我的事。毕竟安全第一。而且也不想因为这个冲突导致挂科什么的。 [For example, when it comes to political issues in class, they [tutor] might lean more towards Western views or something like that, while we might be, you know, more Eastern or have different ideologies, you know? In those situations, their perspectives might be quite different, and sometimes it's hard to understand where they're coming from. Sometimes they might even come off as sarcastic about it. When there's conflict like that, personally, I might just avoid getting into it, you know? Like, it's up to them whether they want to listen to what I have to say or not. After all, safety first. And I don't want conflicts like that affecting my grades or anything.] (Student 13, October 17, 2023)

Like Students 11 and 13, Chinese international students have adopted silent strategies to not be involved in some different cultural or political adjustments. It is evident that for Chinese international students, avoiding conflicts in classroom settings is paramount. This attitude towards avoiding confrontation likely stems from a focus on maintaining classroom harmony and reflects traditional Confucian values, which advocate for the avoidance of conflict in managing interpersonal relationships (Tran, 2013).

In addition, it is worth noting that the impact of the pandemic has further exacerbated the interaction difficulties between Chinese international students and tutors in the remote learning environment.

An aspect worth noting in terms of proactiveness is that during the pandemic, the use of Zoom for online teaching also affected the proactiveness of students. In virtual environments, students may not interact with tutors as directly as they do in face-to-face settings, leading them to feel relatively passive. For example, Student 18 stated,

就是疫情那会，怎么说呢，当时都隔着个屏幕，其实很不习惯，就是说有时候对着屏幕说话感觉很别扭，反正当时说话的时候挺紧张的，而且他们讨论的比较深入的时候我也不知道该怎么继续往下去去拓展这个比较深入的问题。 [*During the COVID-19, back then when we were all behind screens, it was really uncomfortable, like talking to a screen sometimes felt awkward. I was pretty nervous speaking, and when they got into deeper discussions, I wasn't sure how to further expand on those deeper issues.*]

(Student 18, October 21, 2023)

The shift to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the natural delivery of face-to-face interactions. This change amplified existing challenges related to intercultural competence among Chinese international students in Australian classrooms. This disruption made these students appear even more passive and anxious when interacting with Australian tutors, further diminishing their willingness to engage. Although technological advancements facilitated teaching and communication during the pandemic, the lack of fluid and spontaneous interaction remained a significant limitation. Therefore, in anticipation of potential future crises of a similar nature, it is essential to consider how to create a more supportive and psychologically safe interactive environment for students.

From tutors: proactiveness of Chinese international students

Interviews with tutors reveal that a notable contradiction emerged in that Chinese international students have been very polite and quiet in classrooms. They have displayed good attitude and respect to tutors and other students, but they are not proactive in discussions. Many tutors observed clear differences between Chinese and Australian students in their approaches to classroom interaction. Chinese international students often do not exhibit active engagement, as Tutor 7

described:

Chinese international students are not as extroverted in the classroom. This, I think, is a very common observation. They are highly motivated to succeed in their own way, but I believe there are significant differences between Chinese students and Western students generally, and certainly between Chinese students and those raised in Australia, in terms of their proactiveness with speaking up and sharing their ideas. Beyond that, there are also important differences in the values that people bring as a result of their culture. I have to say, I am still trying to understand these cultural differences. (Tutor 7, December 15, 2023)

Most tutors agreed in terms of proactiveness that Chinese international students are motivated learners but less willing to speak up and share their ideas in the classroom.

This reticence may stem from cultural backgrounds that emphasise humility, respect for authority, and listening over speaking out (Hofstede, 2001), contrasting sharply with the more vocal and participatory culture prevalent in Western classrooms (Arkoudis & Marangell, 2023). Australian tutors are also making efforts to understand and explore different forms of classroom participation and learning styles. Consistent with the description of Tutor 7, Ying et al. (2024) point out that teachers often lack adequate guidance and training in understanding the backgrounds of Chinese international students, even though they may be able to recognise the potential negative consequences associated with students' cultural backgrounds.

Some tutors with a Chinese cultural background offered more pointed insights when comparing the classroom interactions of Chinese and Australian students. They noted that many Chinese students lacked genuine engagement toward interaction, with some demonstrating a form of instrumental motivation. As Tutor 14 remarked:

A lot of students have this kind of utilitarianism thinking, like, whatever helps them get a higher grade, that's what they'll focus on. So, if you tell them that participating in class will get them extra points, they'll start putting their effort into that. (Tutor 14, March 3, 2025)

Tutor 14 stated that many students' motivation to participate in classroom activities is fundamentally grounded in a utilitarian approach, where the pursuit of high grades serves as the primary driver of engagement.

Expectations from tutors: more preparation before classes

Interview data reveals some tutors argue that the proactiveness of Chinese international students cannot be solely attributed to prior learning habits. The deeper issue may lie in a lack of preparation, which makes classroom discussion difficult or even impossible. Some tutors with Chinese cultural backgrounds have shared their feelings regarding this issue and made suggestions when attempting to enhance the proactiveness of Chinese international students: As Tutor 11 shared:

I wouldn't say it's all of them, but overall, it feels like more and more students [Chinese international students] just aren't very engaged these days. The biggest issue is that some of them don't have any training in their past school experiences. They did not understand independent learning and rely on teachers. A lot of them don't even do the essential readings before class. So how are we supposed to have a discussion? They don't know what we're talking about. (Tutor 11, February 26, 2025)

From the perspective of Tutor 11, the proactiveness of Chinese international students is fundamentally grounded in their cognitive readiness and preparation. The lack of

sufficient input inevitably constrains their capacity for discussions. To bridge this gap, it is important to recognise that deeply entrenched cultural patterns, resulting from prolonged educational experiences, cannot be reversed through isolated instances of encouragement or single curriculum interventions. From the tutors' perspective, the core issue may lie in the students' lack of genuine academic commitment, which stands in stark contrast to the more diligent and motivated image associated with them in earlier years. While most Chinese international students express positive attitudes toward learning in both surveys and interviews, this disposition is often not reflected in their classroom behaviour. Many students demonstrate limited engagement and, in some cases, even neglect fundamental pre-class preparation. The transition from teacher-centred to discussion-based pedagogical approaches may contribute to a sense of cognitive dissonance. Students acknowledge the value of active participation but feel either inadequately prepared or anxious about articulating their views.

Follow-up interviews offer indirect evidence that an exam-oriented learning mindset persists among many students, leading them to prioritise individual tasks, such as essay writing and exam preparation, over interactive classroom activities. Consequently, these positive attitudes often remain latent within self-reported data and are not readily observable in classroom practices.

While most participants expressed a desire for more interaction with their tutors in classrooms, they don't often take the initiative to initiate such interaction themselves. This discrepancy suggests a mismatch between tutors' expectations and their actual behaviours in the classroom. Chinese international students seem to expect tutors to lead the interaction, even when they are not preparing well prior to class. This finding highlights the importance of clarifying roles and expectations within the classroom to ensure effective communication and engagement between tutors and students.

From tutors: encouraging dialectical thinking

However, challenges are often accompanied by opportunities. Tutor 11, an expert in cultural nationalism, once observed a rare instance in which a very small number of Chinese international students responded to conflict by bravely defending their positions. In these cases, he offered an alternative strategy for addressing conflicts in the classroom. He encouraged students to seize such opportunities and to apply critical thinking skills when engaging with controversial topics. This observation also led him to develop his own teaching strategy:

I don't think that avoiding these topics is good for their logical development, especially when it comes to dialectical thinking. In one of my classes, I brought up some questions about conflict values, and a few Chinese students actually pushed back quite strongly. I was honestly surprised, didn't expect Chinese students to be that bold or actively engage like that in this kind of situation. I told them that no matter what kind of ideological conflict we're dealing with, they need to approach it with an academic mindset, use examples and evidence to convince me, say it out loud, rather than just relying on what they assume to be true in their own minds. (Tutor 11, February 26, 2025)

Although most Chinese international students tend to adopt an evasive attitude when confronted with issues related to values, tutors have observed that a small number of students have taken the opportunities to express their own views. Notably, however, no tutor reported that such genuine engagement extends to discussions centred on academic knowledge, where students generally continue to display a relatively passive attitude. In classroom discussions, some Chinese students are inclined to respond to sensitive topics. This tendency suggests a strong association between cultural values and personal opinion, whereby participation in such discussions is motivated less by intellectual curiosity and more by a perceived need to defend one's position. As per tutors' observations, Chinese students do not necessarily lack a desire

to express themselves but are more likely to speak up when sensitive topics are introduced. At the same time, this situation reveals the reasons for their reluctance to engage with political-based discussions. These include limited exposure to dialectical thinking, culturally influenced modes of expression, and unfamiliarity with academic discourse conventions.

From tutors: making additional efforts and guidance, using different strategies to support Chinese international students

As discussed above, most tutors recognised that Chinese students may adopt a more silent learning way and exhibit hesitation in verbal expression. In response, they reported making additional efforts to provide gentler forms of guidance to support Chinese international students. As Tutor 1 and Tutor 14 stated:

I've been watching them for a few weeks before. Sometimes they just kept eyes on computer, wrote notes, and staying quiet. They can be more reticent to speak up sometimes, and you need to do a little bit more work to get them to feel comfortable answering questions. (Tutor 1, November 1, 2023)

I really hope they can be more willing to ask questions. That's something many Chinese students tend to lack. Sometimes they're not quite sure how to make good use of the time when the teacher opens up for interaction; it often ends up being awkwardly quiet. So yeah, there's definitely room for improvement when it comes to having the confidence to ask questions. (Tutor 14, March 3, 2025)

In addition, some tutors expressed feelings of uncertainty or helplessness, indicating that they were unsure how best to support Chinese students. As described by Tutor 2:

I guess my concern is that it can affect the whole classroom in that they don't participate whereas other students do and so we can't have kind of a rigorous discussion around a topic. Because that silence is really obvious. And look, there's nothing I can do about it. (Tutor 2, November 14, 2023)

Tutors often encounter difficulties when attempting to enhance the proactiveness of Chinese international students. Some tutors with Chinese cultural backgrounds have shared their feeling regarding this issue:

It's really hard to get them to take initiative. One reason is what I mentioned before. They don't even look at the essential readings, so it's unrealistic to expect them to actively engage in discussion. Another reason is that they've grown up in an education system that's focused on lecturing. Changing that is genuinely difficult, and we've all experienced this challenge. (Tutor 11, February 1, 2025)

From the perspective of Tutor 11, the proactiveness of Chinese international students is not merely a matter of willingness but is fundamentally grounded in their cognitive readiness and preparation. The lack of sufficient input inevitably constrains their capacity for output. To bridge this gap, it is important to recognise that deeply entrenched cultural patterns, resulting from prolonged educational experiences, cannot be reversed through isolated instances of encouragement or single curriculum interventions.

Additionally, many tutors with Chinese cultural backgrounds have proposed adopting a translanguaging perspective when discussing student proactiveness. As articulated by Tutor 17:

I think sometimes we oversimplify this issue (low proactiveness) and see engagement solely with actively speaking polished English in class. A lot of the literature tends to put a label on them, suggesting that Western students are always open and willing to talk and Chinese international students as needing to catch up. Of course, educational background matters. I don't think we should expect them to change completely after coming here. And I'm not asking them to abandon Mandarin after arriving in Australia; I encourage them to mobilise those resources. Sure, it's great if they can adjust to new ways of learning and rethink their past habits. But I don't believe that speaking in class is the only way to show they've truly integrated. What I hope for is that they can actively use the resources including language they are confident with to build their own understanding and gain something meaningful from that. That's when real learning happens. (Tutor 17, March 22, 2025)

The perspective articulated by Tutor 17 challenges certain prevalent oversimplified stereotypes identified in existing literature. Specifically, she critiques simplistic labelling that portrays Chinese international students as universally passive (Xu, 2022b), arguing that such generalisations are excessively rigid and neglecting the fundamental purpose of education, the pursuit of meaningful learning. Tutor 17 emphasises the importance of students' ability to actively draw upon resources in which they feel confident, including their linguistic repertoires. This approach shifts the discourse away from solely focusing on educational backgrounds and toward acknowledging the diversity and complexity inherent in student engagement.

From tutors: the interplay of personality and classroom engagement

As indicated by the student survey findings, personality is also a contributing factor. This was similarly observed by many tutors, as noted by Tutor 13 and Tutor 16:

It really sort of is a question of personality; I think extroverted people [don't care what] the level of language is. If they have an idea, they will try to express it. (Tutor 13, February 28, 2025)

Personality might be a key factor. From what I've observed, language can definitely be a barrier, but students with more outgoing personalities tend to enjoy participating in discussions more. They usually find a way to express their ideas, even if their language isn't perfect. (Tutor 16, March 13, 2025)

Consistent with findings derived from the student survey, Tutors 13 and 16 similarly highlight the significance of personality in shaping Chinese international students' classroom interactions. Their observations indicate that extroverted personalities facilitate active participation, and linguistic barriers are not a dominant factor. This implicitly challenges the dominance of the two other factors of this study, linguistic capacity and language use, and simultaneously questions prevailing assumptions in the broader academic literature. Thus, future research could consider student proactiveness as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by personality, language proficiency, and cultural background, encouraging educators to adopt a broader, more inclusive perspective on student participation.

Overall, tutors' classroom experiences reflect a mixture of helpless and expectations regarding Chinese international students' proactiveness. Deeply rooted cultural patterns are difficult to shift through short-term interventions. Moreover, the impact of COVID-19 has further complicated this issue. Notably, tutors with Chinese or bilingual backgrounds tend to be more cautious about relying on simplistic cultural stereotypes. They have observed diversity in personality and learning approaches beyond such generalisations, recognising that what may appear as a lack of proactiveness could instead reflect different forms of classroom

engagement. Therefore, it becomes evident that emotional and pedagogical support from educators and institutions is essential. This includes developing a more nuanced understanding of learning habits, the paradoxes surrounding positive attitudes and proactiveness, and the role of individual personality, ultimately promoting a more holistic view of Chinese international students.

4.3.3 Affective factors in empathy

The affective factors in empathy have been shared by both Chinese international students and their tutors as the empathy requires both parties to recognise and respect each other's cultural values and emotional attachments.

From students: appreciate tutors' support and building understanding with tutors through classroom interactions

Some Chinese students reported they have developed an awareness of the importance of empathy with their tutors through their classrooms' intercultural experiences. Moreover, the empathy presented by their tutors in the classroom was perceived as playing a meaningful role in facilitating their intercultural competence. Chinese students recognised the empathy and care shown by tutors toward their learning challenges, which in turn helped to build trust between students and tutors.

.....我记得有一门课，他（tutor）说的一些话我们不太理解他的意思，尤其是遇到一些生僻的单词。但是这种时候他就会想要在黑板上以文字的形式呈现出来。我觉得就是对方会感受到你的感受的，然后他感受到你对这个问题，有困惑的时候，他可能就会用一种更简单的方式告诉你。或者就是肢体语言或者图片表达，然后，就是换一种方式告诉你。我觉得这个方式挺好的，就是当我们有一些语言问题的时候他能避免我们产生更大的误会 (Student 1) [... I remember in one class, I didn't quite get what the tutor was saying, especially when it came to some unfamiliar words. But at times like that, he'd try to put it up on the board in writing. I feel like he

could sense your confusion, and when he picked up on that, he might simplify things a bit or use gestures or pictures to get the point across. It's like finding another way to communicate. I think that approach works well when there's a language barrier; it helps prevent big misunderstandings.] (Student 1, October 09, 2023)

Student 1's experience highlights that empathy is extremely valuable and effective in classroom contexts. Tutors successfully convey to students that they understand the challenges students face. The empathy demonstrated by the tutor transforms a potential classroom crisis into an opportunity to build trust, enabling students to feel understood and supported. Although this process may appear to be a one-way transmission of knowledge, it is, in fact, a form of bidirectional meaning-making.

The modelling of empathy by tutors has clearly influenced the development of empathy among Chinese international students. The empathetic environment created by educators appears to empower students to move beyond defensive behaviours, such as avoidance, and to cultivate their own empathetic responses. Many Chinese students reported a willingness to consider others' perspectives when facing cultural conflicts, except political values. They engaged with different perspectives thoughtfully and reflectively. Rather than holding firmly to their own viewpoints, they attempted to understand differences rather than reinforce divisions, as illustrated by Student 13, with an Anthropology major:

当我遇到有些文化冲突的时候(观念的不合), 我可以慢慢理解和接受新的文化, 现在我会试着从他们的角度看问题。或者试着理解他们的观点, 就是, 打心底里尝试接受他们的观点, 不管同意不同意。[When there's conflict like that [Inconsistent concept related to curriculum], personally, I try to see things from their perspective or try to understand where they're coming from, you know, try to be more accepting of their views, agree

to disagree kind of thing. (Student 13, October 17, 2023)

As the student above stated, he has developed empathy and intercultural competence. The classroom serves as an effective space for helping Chinese international students develop affective empathy and an understanding of different cultures. As described by Student 1, small actions by tutors, such as adjusting their teaching methods in response to students' confusion, conveyed a sense of consideration and support. In addition to recognising the empathy demonstrated by tutors, students also exhibited a willingness to engage with differing perspectives in a thoughtful and constructive manner. Rather than responding to cultural or conceptual conflicts with defensiveness, many students adopted an open attitude and made conscious efforts to view issues from others' points of view. This approach was evident even in situations where agreement could not be achieved. It represents a notable shift from prior classroom experiences in China, where authoritative teaching often limited willingness for open dialogue and critical engagement (Hofstede, 2011).

From students: appreciation of tutors' easy-going attitude in the classrooms

The development of empathy among Chinese international students has multiple sources. It is not only fostered by the tutors' influence or the students' personal reflections, but also by a direct response to the egalitarian nature of Australian classrooms. Interview data show that Chinese international students have gained insights into cultural understanding and adaptation by observing and contrasting with their experiences in China, recognising the equality prevalent in Australian culture. For example, Law major Student 20 perceived a sharp contrast with past experiences and noted a stronger sense of equality in the Australian classroom.

这边的 tutor 在上 tutorial 的时候，他会坐着或者是甚至放低身子这样子跟你讲话，我觉得是非常平等的一个表现，而且就是会感觉到比较亲近，这是我非常震惊的一个点。我当时就意识到这是与我们那边不同的点。你像国内的话，特别是理科，根本不会有这样的，也算是我对这边文化的理解。 [*Over here, when the tutor is in a tutorial, they might be sitting or even lowering body while talking to you. I find it's a really equal kind of thing, and it feels quite close. That was a big shock for me. I realised it's different from back home. In China, you wouldn't see that at all. It's like my first glimpse into the culture here.*] (Student 20, October 23, 2023)

The tutor behaviour described by the Chinese international students highlights the egalitarian features of the Australian educational environment (Lam & Hale, 2024). This contrasts sharply with the traditional Chinese educational setting, where absolute power distance is maintained (Hofstede, 2011). The informal and egalitarian behaviour of Australian teachers in the classroom provides students with a new perspective, aiding them in developing empathy within an intercultural context. This experience extends beyond academic learning to encompass fundamental principles on how to understand and respect diverse cultures within a globalised educational framework.

From tutors: taking responsibility to support students

Findings show that tutors also offer affective empathy to Chinese international students. They display a sense of responsibility, and play a pivotal role in the development of Chinese international students' intercultural competence. As Tutor 17 mentioned:

I think teachers really need to take responsibility and help all of their students, get them more involved in class. What I care about most is figuring out how to

bring those students in and make sure they don't feel left out or different from the local students. Sure, their English might not be great at first, but honestly, who's good at it right when they first arrive? I felt the same pressure when I first came here. That's why I feel it's my job to step up and take some of that pressure off them. But it really depends on what kind of teacher they have met. If the teacher is cold and distant, [they] sometimes just say, "Well, that's your problem". That puts up an invisible wall between them, and then the students just feel even more frustrated and discouraged. (Tutor 17, March 22, 2025]

Through the tutor's personal experiences, he was able to relate to the linguistic barriers and psychological pressures that students face when they first enter an Australian classroom. This background of the tutors often motivates them to adopt a proactive and supportive approach, encouraging student participation and reducing feelings of marginalisation.

Consistent with the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), teachers' positive expectations, equitable treatment, and sustained support can enhance students' self-efficacy and trigger a virtuous cycle of intercultural development. Conversely, as Tutor 17 observed, indifferent or negative attitudes on the part of teachers may give rise to the Golem Effect (Babad, Inbar, & Rosenthal, 1982). This leaves students isolated and unsupported, thereby undermining their confidence and willingness to engage in intercultural interactions, which can initiate a vicious cycle.

From a dialectical perspective, tutors' attitudes and their commitment to equality and support in intercultural classrooms influence students' affective experiences. They also profoundly shape the direction and extent of students' intercultural competence development.

From students: understanding of tutors' values, respecting different cultural perspectives

Understanding and acknowledging differences plays a critical role in enabling students to show respect and cultivate empathy. Findings show that Chinese international students not only recognised differences but were also willing to appreciate how others perceive and express ideas within their own cultural backgrounds. For example, when asked about their views when facing constructive criticism, Student 6 reported:

其实了解他们文化之后会觉得其实挺正常的，是因为他们不仅批评直接，他们表扬人也很直接。就是我们国家的文化是会比较吝啬一个夸赞，然后也会比较委婉地去进行给出一些意见，但他们这边文化就是他们会很轻易出口很轻易说出口对你的赞美，所以他们也会很轻易说出口对你的一些，建议或者是批评。因为如果只是我单方面的去听课，很多时候只是接收的话，我可能觉得我理解了，但其实我不太能（全部理解），但是在和 tutor 或者同学讨论的过程中，我可以把我接收到的知识重新再二次消化一遍，并且可能在讨论中，你会发现其他人的视角包括他提的一些问题，我就会觉得，哦，原来还有这样的一个视角是我忽略。 [Actually, after understanding their culture, it feels quite normal. It's because they not only criticise, but they also praise people very directly. In our country's culture, we tend to be stingier with compliments, and we often give advice in a more indirect manner. But here, in their culture, they readily give praise, so they also easily offer suggestions or criticism. I think it's quite normal. Because if I just listen to lectures unilaterally, most of the time, I might think I understand, but actually, I might not fully grasp it. However, in the process of discussing with tutors or classmates, I can digest the knowledge I receive again, and maybe in the discussion you'll find other people's perspectives, including the questions they raise, and then I'll think, "Oh, I overlooked this perspective".] (Student 6, October 11, 2023)

Unlike the more reserved praise and indirect criticism common in Chinese culture, Australian culture tends to embrace direct praise and criticism (God & Zhang, 2019). This directness may initially present a significant cultural shock to Chinese international students from different cultural backgrounds. However, over time, Chinese international students gradually come to understand and adapt to these different styles of cultural communication, recognising that this adaptation is a crucial part of developing empathy.

Moreover, Chinese international students demonstrate a clear understanding of cultural differences, viewing them as distinctions rather than judgments of superiority or inferiority. Student 6 highlights how understanding cultural differences helps normalise direct praise and criticism in Western culture, contrasting with the more reserved approach in their own culture. They emphasise the value of engaging in discussions with tutors and classmates to gain diverse perspectives.

Overall, these insights highlight the proactive efforts of Chinese international students to bridge cultural gaps and enhance their intercultural competence, contributing to more inclusive interaction and effective engagement in the classroom context.

From tutors: proactive empathy and supportive strategies

Most tutors identified interaction challenges with Chinese students and responded with proactive empathy and supportive actions. They demonstrated a constructive and pragmatic form of cultural empathy by actively adjusting their teaching strategies to better support Chinese students' needs. As tutor 7 described:

I've noticed various communication styles in the classroom. Here are a few things I pay close attention to. Firstly, I try to speak a bit slower. Honestly,

how I'm speaking at now is about the same. You see, I've made a fair assumption that you're a Chinese student, English being your second language. So, I've slowed down my pace. I also pause more frequently, giving people time to process information. I'll repeat myself if I suspect something hasn't been understood. I use specific examples to explain things as best as I can. (Tutor 7, December 15, 2023)

Tutor 7 demonstrates not only an understanding of the challenges faced by Chinese students for whom English is a second language, but also actively adjusts their own communication style. This includes slowing down speech and repeating key points to better accommodate students' needs and create space for processing and comprehension. These strategies effectively shift the burden of adaptation from resting solely on the learner to becoming a shared responsibility between educator and student. Moreover, many tutors were able to recognise the challenges faced by Chinese international students and expressed compassion toward their situation. Some of them were unsure how to provide effective support. It has appeared to remain at the level of sympathy rather than developing into actionable empathy, as Tutor 14 mentioned:

From my perspective, I can basically understand what they're trying to say. I usually look at it with a sense of sympathy. Honestly, I do feel sorry for them; it's a shame they haven't had the kind of good or proper training in how to communicate well with teachers. And I don't just mean speaking or writing, but overall communication skills. (Tutor 14, March 3, 2025)

Despite a shared acknowledgment of the challenges faced by Chinese international students, tutors differ significantly in their capacity to translate sympathetic understanding into concrete pedagogical interventions. Many tutors, unlike Tutor 7

who specialises in the field of evaluation and teaching, remain primarily focused on their own disciplinary expertise. While this focus reflects their academic priorities, it also reveals a lack of perception and actionable guidance necessary for supporting students' development of intercultural competence. This gap also exposes the insufficient institutional supports in place to equip tutors with the guidance and training required for facilitating intercultural competence for students.

From tutors: promoting an inclusive educational environment

Most tutors have viewed the English language barrier of Chinese international students with empathy and articulate positive teaching practices that promote inclusivity, creating an empathetic educational environment for Chinese international students. As described by Tutor 7 and Tutor 13:

I try to be very careful not to use Australian vernacular terms or idiomatic terms. Do you know what I mean by that? Yeah, vernacular. I actually had an Australian Masters student point out to me at one point that I did this many years ago, that I do use or I did use slang terms a fair bit in my teaching. And I realised I need to stop doing that because it's not going to be helpful to people who don't have Australian English as their first language. That's another thing that I try to do. I try to use a very plain version of English to express myself, and if I do really want to use a slang term. I might think there's a good reason for doing this. Then I take care explaining what I mean by it, and it might actually be useful and interesting for Chinese international students to learn a bit more.
(Tutor 7, December 15, 2023)

Tutor 7 demonstrates strategies, as an educational expert, to support the challenges faced by non-native English speakers in the classroom. In parallel, Tutor 13 brings a unique perspective based on personal experience, reflecting his empathy toward

language-related difficulties.

Language barriers are normal and understandable. I've personally experienced this from the opposite side as well. ... When I studied in China, I often had moments where I knew the answer but struggled to find the right words quickly enough. (Tutor 13, February 28, 2025)

Both tutors demonstrate a clear understanding of language inclusivity. Tutor 7 illustrates an awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity within Australia's multicultural educational context by acknowledging students' language backgrounds (Turner & Tour, 2024). This reflective practice underscores the tutor's construction of a caring and inclusive educator identity and highlights their active efforts to foster an accessible learning environment. Tutor 13 draws upon personal international learning experience in China to offer a broader and more empathetic perspective, framing language as a universal and understandable challenge. This perspective aligns with broader discourses of inclusivity and intercultural communication in international classrooms. Both tutors challenge deficit-oriented views of language barriers, instead conceptualising them as common educational challenges that require shared responsibility and adaptive pedagogical strategies.

4.3.4 Affective adaptation

From students: transitional process to affective adaption

Survey data on the affective adaptation component shows the Chinese international students' lowest scoring in affective factors. In the survey, 75 respondents selected 1 or 2 points for item 23 ("I feel no barriers when interacting with tutors"), indicating that many students experience difficulties in affective adaptation. This is particularly evident in their challenges with effectively conveying emotions during interactions with tutors. As highlighted by Student 4 in the interview,

some students feel helpless and frustrated in clearly expressing their feelings, leading to repeated attempts at understanding and communication.

在对一些情感的一些就是表达的过程中，就明显感觉到自己就是很力不从心，这种感觉就是没法把自己的情绪传达出去，就只能在于重复去学。这就是我认为这些事情就是有一些不知道怎么回答的场合。 [*When it comes to expressing emotions, I often feel like I'm struggling to find the right words. It's like I can't convey my feelings effectively, and I end up just repeating myself. Sometimes, I find myself in situations where I simply don't know how to respond.*] (Student 4, October 10, 2023)

Their responses reflected a sense of emotional dissonance, indicating not genuine affective adjustment but rather a feeling of passivity on adaptation. This sentiment is exemplified by the account of Student 13:

我觉得仍然就是说这仍然就像盲人摸象没有亲自来到 Australia 的话，就是是体会不到这种真正的完全适应的这种文化。比如说就是说交流方式，要比如说就是这种澳大利亚化的这种，或者说西方化的这种西式礼仪也要有注意一些这种。但是我到现在也并不能完全适应，就有一种迁就的感觉。就是有一句话怎么说来着，能理解，能尊重，但是适应恐怕得一段时间。 [*I feel like it's still like the blind touching the elephant; if you haven't actually been to Australia, you can't fully grasp this culture. Like, the way people communicate here, it's more Aussie-style or Westernised, and you have to be mindful of that. But even now, I haven't fully adapted; there's still a sense of accommodation. There's a saying, you can understand, you can respect, but I'm afraid that adapting probably takes some time.*] (Student 13, October 17, 2023)

It is reassuring that none of the participants voiced overt resistance to

adaptation. Although most Chinese international students described their adjustment as passive, often accompanied by discomfort and internal struggle, they nonetheless demonstrated a clear willingness to engage with new cultural and academic norms. Consistent with tutors' observations, adaptation is seldom instantaneous; rather, it typically unfolds gradually and can require a substantial investment of time and effort.

Faced with difficulties in expressing affective adaptation, Chinese international students resort to repetitive learning in an almost compulsive manner. Rather than genuinely integrating emotional expression, they find themselves trapped in repeated cycles of practice, continuously trying yet failing to authentically convey their feelings. As described by Student 4, this repetitive pattern reflects not a proactive adaptation, but rather an involuntary repetition stemming from a sense of helplessness and an inability to break through their emotional barriers.

The excerpts from Students 6 and 9 illustrate reasons for significant affective adaptation issues within a new educational context. Both students articulate a pronounced anxiety associated with participation, highlighting emotional barriers rooted in previous educational experiences and self-perceptions.

之前在课堂上和他们 (Tutors) 讨论或者是回答问题会有一种焦虑感。很焦虑自己有没有准确传达, 怕说错暴露自己的不足, 留下不好的印象。有时候自己比较有想法也不敢说出来。在这边老师们虽然说鼓励我们有什么说什么, 但就是以前国内课堂上的影响一直是一种心理负担, 不太敢在这边造次 (鲁莽)。[...] 我自己有时候也想积极地按照老师们的要求多去讨论, 但就是过不了那个坎(心里负担). [I used to feel really anxious when discussing things or answering questions in class with the tutors. I'd worry about whether I was expressing myself clearly, afraid of saying something wrong and exposing my weaknesses or leaving a bad impression. Sometimes I actually had ideas I wanted to share, but I just didn't dare speak

up. Even though the teachers here always say we should feel free to speak our minds, the influence of classroom culture back in China still weighs on me—it's like a psychological burden. I still feel like I shouldn't step out of line too much. [...] Sometimes I do want to be more active and join the discussions like the teachers suggest, but I just can't get past that internal barrier.] (Student 6, October 11, 2023)

老实说，我想积极回答问题肯定是想的，有时候也强迫自己去做。因为我觉得可以给老师留个好印象，得到高分吗。但我觉得我自己的行事风格还是比较喜欢安静，不太喜欢去做那个刺头 (stands out or causes a stir), 引起别人注意。[To be honest, I do want to participate more and answer questions. Sometimes I even push myself to do it because I think it might leave a good impression on the teacher and help me get a higher grade. But honestly, my personality is more on the quiet side. I do not really like being citou [one who likes to talk back or stir up trouble], drawing too much attention to myself.] (Student 9, October 16, 2023)

Student 6 explicitly identifies a recurring fear of inadequately conveying ideas or inadvertently revealing perceived personal inadequacies, which could lead to negative evaluations by tutors. Despite the tutors' explicit encouragement of open dialogue, the student describes a psychological burden inherited from past educational experiences, manifesting as reluctance to speak freely for fear of being perceived as rash or inappropriate. Similarly, Student 9 emphasises internal conflict through terms such as “forcing myself”, reflecting the performative pressure of participation aimed primarily at impression management rather than genuine emotional or intellectual engagement. The student's invocation of “the philosophical true self” further signals a deep-seated tension between an intrinsic preference for quietness and external expectations to appear active and engaged. The metaphorical avoidance of becoming a

“troublemaker” underscores the student’s anxiety about visibility and non-conformity. Collectively, these narratives reveal that affective adaptation encompasses not merely cognitive and linguistic adjustment, but also the complex negotiation of emotional identities and deeply internalised fears of judgment within educational discourse.

From tutors: understand and support the process in affective adaptation

Furthermore, consistent with the students’ reflexivity, tutors also clearly recognised that affective adaptation and shifts in learning styles require a significant amount of time. They acknowledged both the long-term nature and the challenges involved in this process. As Tutor 15, a tutor from a business school with a high proportion of Chinese international students, shared based on over ten years of observation:

It might take quite a long time for them to really adapt here. A year or two probably isn't enough. There just isn't enough time for them to change, especially for postgraduates. Their learning habits are already deeply ingrained, and I think it takes a long time to break out of that mould. (Tutor 15, March 3, 2025)

As highlighted by Tutor 15, affective adaptation is particularly challenging for Chinese international students, whose thinking patterns have been shaped over many years within a different educational system. Most students typically stay in Australia for only 1.5 to 3 years, which limits the time available for meaningful adaptation. Given these constraints, institutional support has exposes especially important again. While tutors and institutions may expect they can rapidly adapt, genuine affective adjustment develops gradually and unevenly, requiring patience, ongoing guidance, and recognition of students’ prior educational experiences.

From students: adaption is more like a subtle, gradual process

Inertia in thinking patterns and long-standing educational habits have developed into deep-rooted thought patterns. Many Chinese international students described how their previous educational experiences continued to influence their ways of thinking. They also highlighted the affective challenges of this process, including emotional dependence on familiar practices and the difficulty of making adjustments. These expressions illustrate that adapting to a new educational system involves the gradual repeated negotiation of affective responses. When asked about how they perceive affective adaptation as a challenge and whether they recognise that the ways of thinking here differ from those in their home country, students 17 and 9 described:

其实我觉得他这个适应更像是潜移默化了的这么一个东西。但就是觉得我更热衷于高中那会儿更愿意跟老师提问题。高中找老师提问题可能就是老师催着你，有问题赶紧问。怎么着？然后看班里的其他学生都提问题了。就是说可能也要提一提，找老师问问题才不会显得，就是那种不会让老师觉得我没学习的感觉。但是来到这边呢，我越来越觉得大学应该更多就是像自发性地，在 tutorial 上有那种想要去讨论的氛围，其实就是鼓励大家提问题，自己想去问问题而不是有点强制的感觉。 [I actually feel like the way of adapting is more like a subtle, gradual process that happens over time. Back in high school, I was definitely more eager to ask teachers questions at that time. It was kind of like the teachers would push you, saying, "If you have questions, ask them now!" Plus, when you saw other students in the class asking questions, you felt like, "Okay, I should probably ask something too", just so the teacher wouldn't think I wasn't studying hard. But after coming here, I've started to feel that university is more about being self-motivated. In tutorials, there's this atmosphere that encourages discussion, where you want to ask questions because you're genuinely curious,

not because you're being forced to.] (Student 17, October 20, 2023)

Student 17's reflections reveal the continuing influence of teacher-driven guidance in classrooms in their home country. This observation aligns with previous findings on the habitual patterns of Chinese international students, indicating that deeply rooted expectations from teacher-led educational systems remain central to their learning practices. Even in a more self-directed and discussion-oriented environment, residual reliance on instructors' guidance continues to shape how they participate in tutorials and approach academic tasks. This enduring influence of prior inertia thinking is reflected in Student 9's descriptions. She emphasises that this thinking pattern from previous schooling make adaptation a gradual and challenging process, necessitating adjustments from students over time.

我感觉可能更多的是因为出于一种对曾经国内教育那种那个习惯性的吧，因为他有一种 mindset 就是这种固定惯性思维，然后会。就是尝试回答那个，因为他们害怕或者说因为他们在那种教育背景久了。当然我觉得这种一般是很难调整的就这种习惯惯性思维，或者这种是压根调整不了的。所以，这个是只能说是慢慢的去改善这个，或者说慢慢的去那个（适应）。说实话，只能要么就是老师去适应，要么就是同学去适应。总得有一方去适应。当然像我们这只来一两年的很难改变我觉得，只能说是适应了一点。 [I feel like, might be more driven by that habitual mindset from their previous education back home. It's like they have this fixed way of thinking, you know, this ingrained habit, and they try to respond because they're afraid or because they've been in that educational environment for so long. Of course, I think it's really hard to adjust that kind of habitual thinking, or maybe it's just impossible to change it altogether. So, it's like you can only slowly improve it, or slowly adapt to it. Honestly, it's either the teachers adapt, or the students do. Someone's got to adapt, you

know? But for us, who've only been here for a year or two, it's hard to change, I think. You just get used to it little by little.] (Student 9, October 16, 2023)

Inertia in thinking patterns and deeply ingrained educational habits exert a significant influence on students' affective adaptation processes. Student 17 described the enduring impact of previous educational experiences. They suggested that although students may demonstrate an increased willingness to initiate questions at the university level compared to high school, this behaviour often remains shaped by earlier, externally driven motivations rather than arising from genuine personal engagement. Similarly, Student 9 emphasised that long-standing mindsets developed under prior educational systems contribute to a form of cognitive and emotional inertia that students find difficult to overcome within a limited timeframe. As a result, rather than achieving authentic affective adaptation, students frequently engage in a gradual and somewhat superficial adjustment process, which appears to be motivated more by external demands than by internal transformation.

From tutors: create affective safe zone

Many tutors demonstrated an understanding of the challenges students face in adapting to new learning environments. Some tutors were able to identify key turning points for students developing the affective adaptation. As mentioned before, Tutor 7 and Tutor 10 emphasised the word "brave" and directly pointed out students' psychological barrier of fear of making mistakes. As echoed by Tutor 5, an expert in education policy, drawing on his understanding of systemic educational practices, Chinese international students are expected to demonstrate courage in challenging their established ways of thinking and to move beyond the comfort zone of highly protected learning environments.

What they really need is to break out of their old learning habits and try to embrace new things. Like I said before, Chinese students, once they've left their home country and come to Australia, need to learn to welcome new experiences. They can't keep expecting the same kind of constant protection, like a baby wrapped in a blanket anymore. (Tutor 5, November 30, 2023)

While stepping out of the comfort zone, many tutors mentioned the importance of establishing an affective safe zone during classroom interactions. This reflects their active efforts to support Chinese students by creating a tolerant, low-anxiety environment that facilitates adaptation to different interaction styles.

Chinese international students have to feel safe. When they feel safe with the class, they are probably more willing to share their answers or participate. But if they don't feel comfortable, they don't share, then I don't think they're really achieving the purpose of the tutorial. So, I guess the tutor plays a role in helping them to feel safe. (Tutor 6, December 05, 2023)

While many tutors actively worked to create a safe zone for Chinese international students, the majority also expressed the expectation that students would eventually move beyond it in order to achieve personal and academic growth. The notion of being “brave” was frequently mentioned in this context. For example, Tutor 4, reflecting the views of many tutors, emphasised that the willingness to express oneself and to make mistakes is a crucial aspect of affective adaptation. She also highlighted the importance of providing students with an appropriate affective safe zone to reduce emotional pressure during classroom interactions and to encourage their gradual engagement beyond their comfort zone.

They just have to take as many opportunities as they can to push beyond their

comfort zone. Don't use translation software or at least try to minimise reliance on it. Be brave, you know. The bird, relinquishing that stigma around sort of shame. If you don't put yourself out there, you don't learn as much and it's good to make mistakes, helping them to understand. Don't be afraid to ask when you don't know something. (Tutor 4, December 04, 2023)

Tutors pointed out the importance of establishing an affective safe zone as students begin to step outside of their comfort zones. This safe zone, characterised by a tolerant, low-pressure classroom environment, plays a crucial role in reducing anxiety and supporting the adaptation process of Chinese international students. As highlighted by Tutors 4, 5, 7, and 10, bravely moving beyond one's comfort zone is considered a necessary first step in affective adaptation and represents a deliberate break from prior educational habits. Moreover, when examining discourses surrounding Chinese international students' affective adaptation, the emphasis often falls on a sense of being pushed. In this context, the emotional safety that tutors strive to cultivate becomes especially significant, as it offers a critical foundation for students to confront challenges while navigating unfamiliar interactional norms.

In addition, many tutors can identify that for Chinese international students, discussing issues after class or via email is an affective safe space. Most Australian tutors understand the issues and they attempt to accommodate the needs of Chinese international students to overcome obstacles and adapt more swiftly to the Australian education system. As mentioned by Tutor 4:

They might feel safer asking questions via email, without any sense of embarrassment. Also, through email, they can use translation for better understanding. But if I speak in person, I might talk quickly or use Australian expressions they might not be familiar with. (Tutor 4, December 04, 2023)

Moreover, many tutors recognise that Chinese international students benefit from affective safe spaces where they can engage without feeling embarrassed or pressured.

However, findings from tutors employed on casual contracts reveal a challenge related to extra support fairness and remuneration within the university system, which further complicates the affective adaptation of Chinese international students. As tutor 4 described:

A lot of tutors, we're on casual contracts. So, we don't get paid for extra support. It might be seen as not caring or, you know, not wanting to sort of teach. So, when I do all my emails to students, I don't get paid for that time. Some tutors just say no; I'm not emailing you like after hours or I'm not giving you extra information because we're not paid for it. The university system is actually quite flawed in terms of pay and it's OK if people are on ongoing contracts, but for casual contracts like mine, if someone doesn't understand in English [the payment issue] ... that is also a barrier, that maybe the Chinese international students don't know that I'm not getting paid for this. [...] And to be honest, supporting them in learning mentally and telling them what classes look like here, it's fine, even just answering questions after class. But I feel like it's actually unfair to other students if the things we're discussing are quite important. (Tutor 4, December 10, 2023)

Tutor 4 highlights critical tensions within contemporary higher education, particularly emphasising the imbalance between the provision of extra academic support and the lack of corresponding compensation. This imbalance encompasses three key areas: affective support, knowledge fairness, and institutional supports. While drawing attention to underlying philosophical issues such as the commodification of education, unpaid affective supports, and educational equity,

the tutor also implicitly advocates for a better understanding of international students' affective adaptation. This is especially relevant for Chinese students, who may experience cultural barriers and emotional difficulties in integrating into the academic environment. It is worth noting that there's a broader institutional need to establish structured support systems that address both the fair remuneration of educators for additional work and the primary emotional needs of students. Building a comprehensive and equitable support framework is essential to ensure that educators are adequately compensated for their contributions, and that students receive a fair, inclusive, and emotionally supportive educational experience.

Qualitative findings further reveal reasons for positive attitude and low proactiveness. These include previous experiences with passive learning styles, Confucian-influenced norms of politeness, a strong respect for teacher authority, and anxiety about making mistakes. Notably, tutors also identified students' personality as a contributing factor to their proactiveness, which aligns with the quantitative data collected from the students. On empathy, a generally passive approach to affective adaptation emerged as a common issue among Chinese international students. In response, tutors have been making conscious efforts to bridge this gap by creating emotionally safe learning environments and encouraging students to step out of their comfort zones.

4.4 Summary and concluding marks

This chapter reported on the affective factors of Chinese international students that have influenced their development of intercultural competence and their interactions with Australian tutors in classroom settings. The analysis has focused on the four core components of attitude, proactiveness, empathy and affective adaptation, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data.

Overall, the quantitative findings reveal distinct patterns across the four affective factors. Attitude was strongest, reflecting students' respect for tutors and openness to diverse perspectives, while proactiveness was weakest, indicating reluctance to initiate interactions. Empathy was moderate, declining among students aged 26–30, and affective adaptation ranked lowest, with many students reporting anxiety, passive adjustment, and limited sense of belonging. Age was linked to more positive attitudes and proactiveness, though empathy declined in mid-age groups. Personality, particularly extroversion, consistently enhanced all four components. Educational level supported proactiveness and adaptation at undergraduate and postgraduate stages but declined at the PhD level due to heightened academic pressures. Language proficiency also played a central role: students at the B2 level showed basic competence, C1 learners demonstrated greater openness and adaptability, and Exempt participants with prior English-medium education achieved the highest scores, especially in attitude and adaptation. While language competence forms a vital foundation for intercultural engagement, individual learning histories and cultural contexts also shape outcomes.

The qualitative findings revealed the reason behind four major affective-related challenges. First, attitude is the strongest factor demonstrated by Chinese international students and represents the first step in developing their intercultural competence. Chinese international students usually show acceptance, respect, and openness toward Australian tutors and Australian culture. Interviews confirmed that the freedom and inclusiveness of Australian classrooms facilitated a shift from passive acceptance to active appreciation. Australian tutors also acknowledged that Chinese international students have held open attitudes to Australian culture, but some students were resistant toward value-based conflicting views. Tutors have encouraged students to develop dialectical thinking skills.

On the other hand, quantitative analyses revealed a widespread phenomenon among Chinese international students, characterised as “high positive, but low

proactive action” in classroom interactions. Despite holding generally positive and open attitudes towards intercultural interactions, students demonstrated notable passivity in actual classroom participation. While many expressed a willingness to be proactive, entrenched non-dialectical thinking, conflict avoidance, exam-oriented learning, anxiety about giving incorrect answers, and a lack of preparation limited their proactiveness in class discussions. Tutors observed this gap between positive attitudes and limited participation. They encouraged students to prepare and read more before classes and establish ways of critical thinking. Most tutors stated they have made efforts to support Chinese international students in the development of intercultural competence. Importantly, findings show that Australian tutors played a key role in breaking passive stereotypes of Chinese international students and in guiding them toward active classroom engagement.

In terms of empathy, Findings reveal that Chinese international students have presented confidence in their empathic capabilities, displaying sensitivity and respect toward classroom norms and their tutors. As shown in the data, both students and tutors have perceived and appreciated meaningful mutual understanding. Many tutors have demonstrated responsibility, care, and support toward Chinese international students; for example, by slowing their speech pace and using various strategies. These practices subtly shaped the students’ empathic responses. Students needed to perceive and appreciate empathy before achieving meaningful mutual understanding. Chinese international students have experienced easy-going classrooms and reported higher levels of trust in Australian tutors and a willingness to consider alternative perspectives of their tutors. This indicates that empathy is co-constructed in intercultural classroom contexts and further highlights the important role of tutors.

An interesting finding regarding affective adaptation was that most Chinese international students did not genuinely feel comfortable and immersed in the classroom environment but rather felt compelled to adapt, often out of necessity rather

than emotional alignment. This underscores the importance of establishing affective safe zones, as emphasised by several Australian tutors, to foster students' willingness to take emotional risks and actively engage in classroom interactions.

Establishing an affective safe zone becomes essential for Chinese international students expressing actively. Tutors need to create inclusive and emotionally secure environments while actively encouraging students' participation. Collaborations between students and tutors will bridge the gap from positive attitudes to tangible classroom actions, thereby enhancing students' proactiveness and affective adaptation capabilities.

Lastly, affective adaption is a developmental process, evolving over time and affected by both external support and internal disposition. A significant positive correlation between students' personality traits and intercultural competence was further supported by tutors in their interviews. More extroverted students may possess more positive attitudes, show a greater willingness to participate actively in class, and demonstrate stronger affective adaptation. Therefore, a detailed examination of personality in relation to intercultural competence is recommended for future research.

Chapter 5 Knowledge factors of Chinese international students’ intercultural competence

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, both Chinese international students and Australian tutors perceived and discussed the factors of attitude, proactiveness, empathy, and affective adaptation in the affective factors. They identified a critical paradox characterised by a positive attitude accompanied by low proactiveness, a phenomenon confirmed by the observations of Australian tutors. Additionally, empathy was highlighted as playing a crucial role in facilitating the affective adaptation of Chinese international students.

This chapter explores the second factor of intercultural competence—knowledge factors—including awareness, English language capacity, and cultural differences. The exploration is guided by the following research question and associated sub-questions:

RQ2 What are the knowledge factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?

RQ2-1 What are the communication awareness of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

RQ2-2 What are the English language capacity of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

RQ2-3 What are the cultural difference of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

The implicit rules governing interaction through decoding are expected to occur in Chinese international students. These implicit contents often contrast sharply with the habits they have already formed. This “decoding” process not only involves acquiring new cultural and social knowledge but also requires a deeper understanding of the underlying linguistic metaphors and cultural values that shape behaviours in

different environments. In Australian classrooms, except affective and beyond subject-specific knowledge, a broader foundation of intercultural knowledge is a key factor in facilitating successful interactions. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) argue that mutual understanding is needed, going beyond surface-level knowledge and comprehension to reach a deeper understanding of each other. To achieve the goals outlined by the “contact hypothesis”, certain conditions, such as knowledge behind the behaviours, must be met for positive learning outcomes.

This chapter reports the research data from both surveys and interviews on the knowledge factors among Chinese international students in Australian classrooms, aiming to answer three sub-questions mentioned above.

The chapter will be structured into four sections. First, Section 1 is an introduction. Section 2 reports survey data and analysis regarding the current knowledge reserve of Chinese international students in terms of communication awareness, English language capacity, and understanding of cultural differences. It also identifies common interactive challenges between Chinese international students and Australian tutors in Australian classrooms. Following this, the chapter analyses the contribution of self-reported personality traits and language abilities of Chinese students to the development of their knowledge reserves. It also investigates whether these demographic factors influence Chinese international students’ intercultural competence

Section 3 will present interview data from both the perspectives of Chinese international students and Australian tutors, offering a critical analysis of knowledge challenges through three key components of the knowledge factors. It explores common issues identified in the survey. It reveals whether Chinese international students possess awareness of the difference of classroom interactive norms. What underlying reasons for the language capacity-related challenges are mentioned by most Chinese international students in the questionnaire. This section also focuses specifically on cultural differences, discussing Chinese international students'

understanding of implicit classroom interaction norms. Each subsection will incorporate perspectives from both students and tutors to highlight their challenges and expectations.

Section 4 will provide a concise summary of the key findings, outlining how knowledge-related challenges influence Chinese international students' classroom interactions with Australian tutors.

5.2 Findings from the survey

This section reports the Chinese international students' intercultural competence knowledge factors, highlighting the challenges and deficiencies they face in Australian classrooms. Three areas of knowledge factors have been revealed from the data below. Furthermore, this section explores whether demographic variables and individual traits influence Chinese international students' knowledge factors.

Table 5.1 Chinese international students' knowledge factors

| | Chinese international students' knowledge factors | | |
|---------------------------|---|---------------|----------|
| | Mean | Std deviation | Variance |
| Communication awareness | 3.82 | 0.48 | 0.23 |
| English language capacity | 3.59 | 0.65 | 0.43 |
| Cultural differences | 3.85 | 0.55 | 0.30 |

Table 5.1 reveals their English language capacity emerged as a notable challenge (M=3.59), whereas cultural awareness (M=3.85) and intercultural communication awareness (M=3.82) showed slightly higher mean levels of self-reported competence. These findings suggest that while Chinese international students have some level of awareness regarding cultural and communication differences, their English language limitation is a critical barrier to intercultural interaction.

5.2.1 *Communication awareness*

Chinese international students' communication awareness reflects their ability to recognise and adapt to differences in classroom communication styles. The lowest score within this factor is observed in item 24 ("I am aware of differences in communication with tutors"), which recorded a mean of 3.42 out of 5, with only 40% of participants rating themselves as confident. This indicates that although students generally acknowledge cultural communication norms, their awareness of tutor–student interactional patterns remain limited. Conversely, item 28 ("I am willing to try if I am conscious of the basic norms of the Australian classroom") received the highest score across the entire knowledge factors, with 93% of students rating themselves as confident or extremely confident. This demonstrates that when basic expectations are made explicit, students are highly willing to adjust their behaviour.

Demographic analysis further revealed female students tended to have better intercultural communication awareness, though the difference was marginal. Age-related differences were more prominent: students younger than 22 exhibited the highest communication awareness. Additionally, undergraduate students showed higher awareness compared to postgraduate peers, reinforcing the trend that younger students tend to be more perceptive of classroom communication norms.

Personality traits also played a role: extroverted students scored higher in communication awareness (M=4.0) compared to introverted peers, who tended to be less confident in this area. This finding supports the interpretation that frequent and confident interaction facilitates awareness of intercultural interaction practices.

In addition, younger students (<22) are more attuned to cultural differences, and PhD students performed best in English language capacity. Extroverted individuals and those with higher English proficiency show stronger overall knowledge awareness. Their challenges include difficulties in using appropriate English vocabulary, grammar and jargon. These represent key areas which should receive targeted support.

5.2.2 English language capacity

The lowest-performing knowledge factor was English language capacity, with students reporting particular difficulties in identifying appropriate academic vocabulary, grammar, and discipline-specific words. For example, item 30 (“I recognise appropriate vocabulary and grammar”) received the lowest score in this factor ($M=3.48$), indicating a lack of confidence in handling formal English required in classroom interactions.

Gender-based differences were observed: male students ($M=3.66$) slightly outperformed female students (3.56) in English language capacity. However, higher standard deviations within this factor suggest wide variability across individuals, implying that prior education and English exposure contribute more significantly than gender per se. With respect to age, older students (26–30) reported the highest scores in this factor, aligning with previous studies (e.g., Jing, 2024) that suggest accumulated academic and professional experience may lead to richer lexical diversity, even if younger students acquire new skills more quickly. PhD students also reported the strongest English language capacity ($M=3.69$), slightly higher than undergraduates ($M=3.63$) and postgraduates ($M=3.53$).

Self-reported traits reinforce these findings: very extroverted students ($M=4.31$) scored significant higher in language capacity than very introverted students ($M=3.39$). Similarly, higher self-rated English proficiency strongly correlated with stronger knowledge awareness across all components. Students classified at the C1 and Exempt levels performed significantly better in language capacity than those at B2, with Exempt participants reporting the highest competence overall.

5.2.3 Cultural differences

Knowledge of cultural differences was the highest-rated factor among Chinese international students in the survey. With a mean of 3.85, this factor indicates a

relatively strong understanding. For example, item 32 (“I can identify tutors’ titles accurately”) scored low ($M=3.58$), pointing to challenges with even seemingly basic academic conventions.

Gender comparisons revealed minimal differences, with male students reporting slightly higher mean scores but female students displaying more consistent levels of lower variance. This suggests that while males perceive themselves as somewhat more knowledgeable, females report steadier and less fluctuating confidence in this area.

In addition, the results from above highlight both the strengths and challenges of Chinese international students’ knowledge about Australian classrooms interaction, the same with the affective factors. Personality is significantly positively associated with overall knowledge competence ($\beta=0.191$, $p<.05$). This indicates that students with more extroverted personalities tend to achieve higher levels of awareness, higher English language capacity and have more knowledge on culture differences in classrooms. By contrast, age reveals a generally negative correlation with overall knowledge competence ($\beta=-0.093$, $p<.05$). This suggests that younger students are more receptive to and capable of recognizing intercultural communication norms, whereas older students may experience greater difficulty in adapting their knowledge structures to new classroom environments.

The results highlight both the strengths and challenges of Chinese international students’ knowledge about Australian classrooms interaction. The following qualitative analysis seeks insight from these survey results to understand how Chinese international students and their tutors perceive the knowledge factors have influenced classroom interactions and how Chinese international students negotiated this in practice.

5.3 Findings from interviews

This section presents the results of the interviews with Chinese international students,

alongside interviews regarding expectations faced by Australian tutors in classroom interactions.

The interview content is analysed based on the themes of responses from three components of knowledge factors which focused on areas of communication awareness and the reasons behind the influences of language capacity and cultural differences. By analysing both the Chinese international students' and tutors' perspectives, the interviews provided more detailed insights and understanding of the challenges and underlying reasons influencing the development of intercultural competence of Chinese international students.

5.3.1 Communication awareness

The key challenge identified by the survey is Chinese international students' lack of communication awareness. When these students move from traditional, teacher-centred classrooms in China to the more interactive classrooms in Australia, they often do not realise that participation is expected. This section of the study focuses on Chinese international students' communication awareness, reports the reasons behind their lack of such awareness, and discusses the importance of communication awareness in the Australian classroom context.

From students: lack of communication awareness

The findings revealed that many Chinese international students struggled to recognise how previous classroom patterns in China influenced their behaviour in Australian classes. They hesitated to participate and ask questions in class, or were unaware of classroom expectations. A key reason for this lack of communication awareness lies in the differences between the Chinese and Australian educational systems, as explained by Student 3 and Student 9:

以前在国内的时候，我真的没有这个意识去和老师讨论。总是被动的接受信息，最多老师问你问题，你起来回答一下，有时候甚至都不想回答，心里

默默期待不要叫我不叫我。而且，在国内，上课的感觉就是那种填鸭式的那种，一直在记笔记，没考虑过要和老师讨论。 [*When I was in China, I never really had the awareness of discussion in class. It was always about passively receiving information ... the teacher asks you a question, you answer, and sometimes you don't even want to answer, silently hoping, "Please don't call on me, please don't call on me."* Plus, the way classes are taught back in our home country is more of a spoon-feeding method. Students are used to taking notes and don't really think about discussing with the teacher.] (Student 3, October 10, 2023)

She pointed out the fundamental differences between Chinese and Australian classrooms. Student 3 majoring in Exercise Physiology stated that her discipline requires extensive interaction and practice to reinforce knowledge in the class. In China, the focus was primarily on lectures and the absorption of theory, which meant students had limited need to interact with teachers. Student 9 agreed with her point below.

以前根本就没有这个意识[*Interacting with teachers*], 每天就是上课，下课，完了考试。但是这边的话和以前的不同是多了一个小课，人数比较少，可能会有有一些发言的机会呀什么的，就是讨论的一个过程，而国内感觉所有课都是 lecture，有时候老师可能都懒得去问问题就是在那念 PPT，更别说沟通了。 [*I never really had that awareness of interacting with teachers before. Every day was just going to class, finishing class, and then taking exams. But here, what's different is that there's this extra small class with fewer people, so there might be some chances to speak or something. It's more of a discussion process. Back in China, it felt like every class was just a lecture. Sometimes teachers didn't even bother asking questions, they just read off the PPT [Power point], let alone actually communicating.*] (Student 9, October 16, 2023)

Most Chinese international students interviewed agreed with Student 3 and Student 9 that their experience in China was very different from Australian classrooms. In contrast, Australian classrooms emphasise a combination of student participation and reflections assisted by tutors' input. Australian tutors encourage students to actively participate in discussions and express their viewpoints with critical thinking skills. Many Chinese international students started to build their awareness and adapt to the open and participatory environment of the Australian classrooms.

In some popular majors at the university, Chinese international students dominated the majority of the class and they tended to interact predominantly with fellow Chinese students. This situation could obstruct the development of their broader communication competence. As Student 14 noted:

感觉很难形成或者说是养成这个沟通的意识，因为在我们专业大部分是中国人，大概能有百分之六七十吧，然后大家在课上也都坐在一起，想着可以一起抱团取暖，因为都可以说中文嘛。讨论也是老师让讨论问题的时候和中国同学讨论，用的还都是中文。也没有想和 tutor 讨论，最多是叫到了回答一下。而且，往往老师总是叫我们那一讨论组的一名代表吧算是，因为每次都是他代表我们回答问题。 [I feel like it's really hard to develop that kind of communication awareness. In our major, most of the students are Chinese, probably around 60 or 70 percent, so we usually sit together in class and kind of stick with each other for comfort, since we all speak Chinese. Even during group discussions, we usually talk to other Chinese classmates, and we use Chinese most of the time. I never really thought about discussing things with the tutor. At most, I would answer if I got called on from the tutor. And usually, the teacher would just ask one person from our group to share our answers, and it was always the same person, so he kind of became our spokesperson.] (Student 14, October 19, 2023)

The tendency to remain within their cultural comfort zone and discuss primarily in Chinese further exacerbates their linguistic and cultural self-isolation in the new cultural context. Moreover, their internal group dependence hinders the development of intercultural awareness.

From tutors: building Chinese international students' communication awareness

Most Australian tutors also have observed that many Chinese international students often lack awareness of interaction norms in Australian classrooms, which can hinder their ability to effectively adapt to the learning environment. As stated by Tutors 11 and 14:

Especially for new students, they don't really have an awareness of the Australian education system yet, or maybe they haven't even thought about it. They haven't reached that transitional stage. Because they've just come from China's exam-oriented education system, they're still stuck in that mindset of solving exam questions. they need to build this awareness (Tutor 14, March 3, 2025)

Tutor 14 understands the reasons behind the problems and encouraged Chinese international students to build intercultural awareness to overcome a sense of alienation in Australian classrooms.

Most tutors pointed out an essential factor: the lack of communication awareness resulting from students' previous exam-oriented education experience. This issue was attributed to students' limited understanding of the Australian educational system. Some tutors have also noted a phenomenon: rather than focusing on classroom interaction, Chinese international students tend to concentrate on strategies for merely "getting by" in class. As Mu and Yu (2021) point out, the ability to engage

in meaningful interaction is contingent upon an individual's communication awareness. Without this awareness, Chinese international students find it difficult to move beyond rehearsed responses and to develop the capacity to interpret and interact across cultural boundaries.

Furthermore, as Tutor 14 highlighted, the shift from exam-oriented education to open discussion requires substantial time and a transitional process, a point repeatedly emphasised in Chapter 4 through affective factors. Chinese international students must build the communication awareness and actively seek change, through conscious adaptation, to achieve genuine behavioural integration. It is only through iterative reflection across these stages that students can transcend superficial learning behaviours, gradually developing proactive participation and effective intercultural competence.

From students: the process of building communication awareness

Interviews data reveal that Chinese international students often reported they were afraid of interacting in classrooms due to misinterpretations of Australian classroom culture. They quickly realised the difficulties in changing their communication habits and expressed fear of speaking out. Student 21 reported the process to develop an opportunity:

我意识到和我的国家课堂不同的那个瞬间我是有一些恐惧的，但是我现在其实挺感谢自己能意识到。如果没有一个主观的意识去学习这些(沟通方式)，其实就等于说是白来了。而且我也确实感到很多朋友来了这边之后有一个改变，但是也有一些同学来了两年都没有改变或者说意识到 [When I realised that classrooms here were different from those in China, I initially felt a bit scared when the tutor asked me to express my views. After a while, now I am actually quite grateful that I can express my views in classes. If I didn't put a conscious effort into learning these [communication methods], it would have

been a wasted opportunity. Moreover, I have noticed that many friends from China have changed their behaviour after coming here, but there are also some Chinese classmates who haven't changed or realised this even after two years.]

(Student 21, October 25, 2023)

This marks a shift from “fear” to “active engagement”. After a period of adjustment, some students developed an understanding the important aspect of Chinese students' transition to the Australian classroom. Anxiety and fear stemming from their culture shock, and uncertainty regarding classroom interaction norms gradually become opportunities and strategies for them to develop their intercultural competence.

From tutors: supporting Chinese international students to improve their awareness in the classroom

Support from tutors is invaluable for Chinese international students as they make the transition to the Australian classroom and improve their intercultural competence. When asked how Australian tutors support students in improving their awareness of Australian classrooms, Tutor 7, an expert in evaluating teaching, shared:

There is a way to give them [Chinese international students] a bit of a challenge of saying that to them, a sense that you're not in China now, you're come all of this way to experience a different form of education. I hope that you'll make something of it and talking back to me in response to questions in class. In most classes I pose a question and invite them to talk about their responses to those questions. And it's my understanding that's a fairly unusual aspect of teaching to Chinese international students. I hope they can enjoy that opportunity as well and get a lot out of it. (Tutor 7, December 15, 2023)

Most tutors report similar strategies. In response, they make efforts to support Chinese international students in transitioning into a different classroom culture, gradually building their confidence to participate in class. However, similar to Tutor 7, tutors'

awareness and understanding of the underlying reasons for Chinese international students' differences are crucial. Without this understanding, misunderstandings could arise and inadvertently reinforce stereotypes. In contrast, reflections from Tutor 12 highlight that students' awareness might not solely depend on the students themselves, but also on tutors' own approaches and awareness:

Whether students become aware [of Australian classroom norms] partly depends on the tutors as well, because each tutor has a different style of interaction. If we want to help students understand our classroom norms, we first need to recognise and appreciate their differences. (Tutor 12, February 27, 2025)

Both tutors 7 and 12 emphasised the critical role that tutors play in supporting Chinese international students in developing their intercultural competence. Consistent with recent trends, tutors seek to understand students' cultural backgrounds through various means. They strive to create inclusive classroom environments tailored to the needs of Chinese international students, thereby facilitating their adaptation and enhancing their intercultural competence (Chen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2024).

However, findings from this study reveal that the support of Chinese international students is often ambiguous and unsystematic. Rather than benefiting from clear, structured guidance from the institution, Chinese international students largely depend on the tentative and sometimes improvised supports provided by tutors, which are based on tutors' personal observations and informal practices.

5.3.2 English language capacity

English language capacity represents the lowest-scoring section for Chinese students in the survey. Nearly all students interviewed emphasised the crucial role of English language, which also represented one of the most significant obstacles they

experienced.

From students: English capacity influenced their engagement

In the interview, many student respondents expressed concerns about how their English language capacity influenced their engagement in the classroom, as Student 13 explained:

我觉得对我个人来言来讲的话，培养跨文化能力最大的挑战就是(英语)语言障碍。(英语)语言是让我比较焦虑的一个点。 [I personally feel that the biggest challenge for developing my intercultural competence is the [English] language barrier. [English] language is what makes me anxious.] (Student 13, October 17, 2023)

Student 13 voiced a concern that reflected the experience of most Chinese international students, emphasizing that limited English language capacity was a key barrier to classroom participation and often led to feelings of anxiety. Student 16 further illustrated this challenge by pointing out that insufficient vocabulary made it difficult to convey intended meanings:

这个词汇量其实是一个大问题，就是经常会词不达意，不知道我想表达的意识是哪个词，甚至有时候着急拼音都飙出来了你知道不，然后老师会说，你这个是什么意思，你可以再解释一下吗？对他们也会反过来，想要寻求一些解释更多 clarification。然后比较多出现这样的问题，甚至有时候都不知道自己说的词是什么。 [Academic English vocabulary is actually a major issue. Often, I can't find the right words to express what I mean. Sometimes, I even blurt out with Mandarin. Then the tutor said, "What do you mean by that? Can you explain it further?" They often seek more clarification. This kind of problem happens quite frequently, and sometimes I don't even know

the academic English words I'm saying.] (Student 16, October 20, 2023)

Student 16 states how limited vocabulary directly affected her oral expression, often leading to miscommunication and repeated requests for clarification.

It is worth noting that the issue of vocabulary also extends to deeper levels of comprehension. Many students reported that even if they know the word meanings in general, they struggled to accurately identify the meaning of a word in a specific context, which could lead to inappropriate situations. For example, findings reveal that many Chinese international students often unintentionally act in ways that lead to misunderstandings or awkward situations. Student 15 reported a case involving a lack of understanding of vocabulary usage that created an embarrassing situation:

我没有注意到 touch 这个词的正确意思。之前我跟 tutor 说我如果还有问题的话下课后会再联系你嘛。tutor 就用很惊恐的表情看着我。我当时真的不知道这个词不能表示联系。当时觉得不太对劲然后我又补了一句我有问题的话通过 email 发送给你可以吗？然后她就好像恍然大悟似的跟我解释了一通，说 touch 不能表示联系，一般这个词表示接触，多指身体触觉上的一种接触。后来我就知道了有些词语可能真不能乱用 [I didn't realise the correct meaning of the word "touch." Previously, I told my tutor that if I had any more questions, I would "touch" her after class. My tutor looked at me with a very shocked expression. I really didn't know that the word couldn't be used to mean "contact." Sensing something was off, I added, "Can I send you an email if I have questions?" Then she seemed to understand and explained to me that "touch" can't mean contact; it generally means physical touch. That's when I realised that some words really shouldn't be used incorrectly.] (Student 15, Oct 19, 2023)

Literally, the word "touch" may seem appropriate in a Chinese context, but in English

it more commonly refers to physical contact rather than the intended meaning of “contact”. The tutor clearly misunderstood the student’s meaning. It can be seen that pervasive negative language transfer from Chinese into English occurs, especially in word meanings and collocation errors.

The way vocabulary is used in Chinese cannot be directly translated into English. Many Chinese international students often rely on translation tool. As a result, this often leads them to ignore alternative meanings and usages. Moreover, Chinese international students are often in a relatively isolated environment in their home country, with limited opportunities to practise authentic spoken English. They frequently rely on direct translations of textbook vocabulary (Mu & Yu, 2021). Similar to Student 16 previously noted, she is struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary, and even blurt out with Mandarin *Pinyin*. This incident highlights a common error among Chinese international students. Chinese students often overgeneralise direct translations, causing misuse in context or grammatical form (Yongqi & Leung, 2002). Academic word-list (AWL) studies report high rates of vocabulary misuse, most frequently involving incorrect word form, part of speech, and context-related errors in writing by Chinese students in English-medium programs (Dodigovic & Wang, 2015). Additionally, Student 11 had a similar experience:

这学期有一个关于原住民文化的课，然后我想去做一个播客，当我将 idea 跟 tutor 说了之后。他觉得就是我说的用了一个就是 explore 这个词，他说这个词是带有侵略意味的，就对于我来说，我只是想说去了解更多的他们的文化，但我的 Tutor 就会认为这个词在这个语境是带有侵略性质的，这就是一个文化的差异。 [This semester, there is a course on indigenous cultures, and I wanted to create a podcast. When I shared my idea with my tutor, he felt that the word I used, “explore”, had a connotation of intrusion in this context. For me, I just meant to understand more about their culture, but my

tutor thought the word had an invasive nature. This might be a cultural difference.] (Student 11, Oct 17, 2023)

Language is not a neutral carrier; rather, it constitutes a field of meaning-making. Such linguistic sensitivity has increasingly become a point of emphasis in recent years, with scholars advising caution against the use of vocabulary that may carry implicit or unintended connotations (Mackay, 2022). The scenario recounted by Student 11 highlights the tension arising from inappropriate word choices, clearly illustrating the inherent risks of language use within intercultural interactions.

Beyond the previously mentioned cases of vocabulary issues, many students also reported deliberately choosing more neutral terms instead of precise expressions, aiming to prevent unnecessary classroom tensions or conflicts. As Student 12 described:

就是因为选词的时候都会比较谨慎的去用尽可能中性的，或者说没有什么 sub-text 之类的这个词去表述我的意思，但是那样子的话，它概括的范围就比较广，它不会很精准地说道我想表达的意思，然后有时候会有一点点不知道我该说哪个词或者说不该。不知道该用哪一种表述来去表达出我想传达出的意思。比如说我可能会觉得这个这个东西很让我觉得沮丧或者无聊。但是，他可能在我看来，我对这个词的认知，我就觉得他有点太过严重了，我可能程度没有那么深，然后我一下子就找不到这个合适的表达来表述出来。 [When choosing words, I tend to be very cautious and use neutral terms without any subtext to convey my meaning. However, this often results in using words that are too broad and don't precisely express what I want to say. Sometimes, I struggle to find the right word or phrase to accurately convey my thoughts. For instance, I might feel frustrated or bored by something, but using those words seems too strong for what I actually feel. This often leaves me at a loss for the appropriate term to use.] (Student 12, Oct 17, 2023)

Chinese international students frequently attempt to avoid words with potential subtexts when making lexical choices, sometimes remaining uncertain about which words are appropriate or inappropriate for accurately conveying their intended meaning. As Fang (2010, p. 43) indicated regarding “culture-loaded words”, certain lexical items carry particular cultural, ethnic, or political connotations. These connotations may lead listeners in intercultural dialogues to feel discomfort or challenged, even if they fully understand the literal meanings. This deliberate selection of neutral terms is not merely a compromise between linguistic accuracy and politeness; it also involves the cultivation of meta-pragmatic awareness (Verschueren, 2000), a continuous reflexive consciousness of what constitutes appropriate expressions versus those potentially causing offence. Student 12’s account aligns precisely with the strategic imperative common within high-context cultures, where prioritizing the interlocutor’s sense of security is paramount (Hofstede, 2011). It is a way of effectively reducing communicative risk. It must be acknowledged that for Chinese international students, enhancing intercultural competence is not just about learning more vocabulary and grammar. More importantly, it involves understanding and mastering the correct meaning of these words within different cultural contexts, which requires continuous practice and reflection.

This difficulty in mastering the right words also extended to listening comprehension. Without sufficient vocabulary, students struggled not only to articulate ideas but also to accurately understand tutors’ feedback. In addition, it directly influences listening comprehension, often resulting in the omission of critical information, as Student 15 said:

我觉得首先是要能听懂他们在说什么，才能做回应。我觉得我的听力不行是因为词汇量低。因为我感觉即使我语法再差，如果我认识那个单词还是能大概猜到他们想说什么。比如说有一次，有个 tutor 给我提了很多建议，但

是有些我确实没有听明白，然后就错过了很多重要的信息，然后还不敢再问，生怕他觉得我没听懂。 [I think the first thing is being able to understand what they're saying before I can respond. I feel like my listening isn't that good mainly because my vocabulary is limited. Like, even if my grammar isn't perfect, if I know the word, I can at least guess what they're trying to say. For example, there was one time a tutor gave me a lot of feedback, but I didn't understand some words, so I missed a lot of important info. And then I didn't dare to ask again because I worried, they'd think I wasn't paying attention or didn't understand.]

(Student 15, October 19, 2023)

From students: challenges in understanding different English accents

A lack of listening skills is one of the factors contributing to their difficulties in interacting with Australian tutors. This difficulty in listening comprehension is not only an issue of limited vocabulary but also compounded by challenges in understanding different accents. Their listening practice is often confined to film and television, and they lacked authentic listening experience prior to arriving in Australia, as described by Student 8:

[...] 他的口音我有时候我真的听不懂，甚至有时候都听不清 assessment 这个词，就有时候感觉压力蛮大的，然后跟他们交流会更有压力。我感觉我能听得懂那种类似咱们普通话的英语，英音呀美音呀什么的，也可能是看电视剧看的多了。但是像一些带有严重口音的真的很难听懂，而且这不是我一个人的问题，大家 (Chinese international students) 都有，我私下里也都问过，他们也都赞同。 [Sometimes I honestly can't understand his accent. There were even times I couldn't clearly catch the word assessment. It can feel pretty stressful, and talking to them adds even more pressure. I feel like I can understand English that sounds more like standard Mandarin to us, like British or American accents, maybe because I've watched a lot of TV shows. But some of the stronger accents

are really hard to understand. And it's not just me. All the other Chinese international students feel the same. I've asked them privately and they all agree.]

(Student 8, October 12, 2023)

Indeed, listening proficiency constitutes a barrier to their engagement with tutors; nonetheless, they also expect the university to promote English in a manner analogous to the promotion of Putonghua (standard Chinese accent) in China, as Student 10 articulated:

我希望学校可以加强一下这个方面的培训呀什么的。就像国内小学，初中那个标语写的，大力推广普通话教学啥的，虽然执行很艰难但是我感觉后期还是比较有成效的。因为英语和中文可能一样都有标准的和一些方言，口音，然后澳洲还有那个俚语。全混杂在一起会比较乱。所以还是希望可以稍微统一一下口音，这样更有助于我们理解。 [I really hope the university can improve training in this area or something like that. It's kind of like the slogans we used to see in primary and middle school back home, promoting the use of standard Mandarin in teaching. Even though it was hard to implement, I think it worked pretty well in the long run in education. English, like Chinese, has both standard forms and all kinds of dialects and accents, and in Australia there's also slang. When it all gets mixed together, it can be pretty confusing. So, I really hope they can standardise the accent a bit more, because that would really help us understand better.] (Student 10, October 16, 2023)

Undeniably, listening skills influence Chinese international students' ability to understand different accents. This highlights the limitations of their listening skills within their overall language capacity and often causes frustration and stress. While Chinese international students hope to follow the classroom content smoothly, accent challenges are unavoidable in real learning contexts. Beyond expecting tutors to

adjust their accents, Chinese international students also need to strengthen their adaptability to different accents within an intercultural environment.

From students: limited native English speakers' environment

Some students also indicated that the lack of an English-speaking environment can impact their development of effective English communication skills in classrooms as many Chinese international students have enrolled in majors where there are not many native English speakers in their classrooms. As a result, Chinese international students have limited opportunities to develop their English language capacity as they use Chinese with their classmates. For example, as Student 14 described:

就是我刚才说的，因为来到这边一块玩的都是咱们中国学生，平常说话也都是用中文，上课也都是坐在一块。有时候跟朋友(Chinese classmates)说了两句英语，朋友反而会觉得你是不是吃错药了。反正这样(和中国同学待在一起)真的对提升英语没有帮助。最搞笑的是身边很多人都是来了这边两年英语没怎么学会，反而学会了一堆中国的方言。 [That's what I just said, since coming here, I mostly hang out with other Chinese students. We usually speak Chinese, and in class we sit together too. Sometimes when I say a couple of sentences in English to my friends, they'll joke like, "What's wrong with you today?" Honestly, sticking with just Chinese classmates doesn't really help improve our English at all. The funniest part is that a lot of people around me have been here for two years and haven't really picked up much English, but they've learned a bunch of Chinese dialects instead.] (Student 14, October 19, 2023)

Student 14's comment shows that Chinese international students may unintentionally marginalise English within their group. This situation may minimise the development of English language capacity. Implicit social norms within the Chinese student group

encourage reliance on their first language, which makes it less necessary to practise English. It is worth noting that Student 14's comment that some students have "learned a bunch of Chinese dialects" reiterated how they have missed good opportunities in Australia. These observations highlight the problems and mistakes made by Chinese international students and a lack of independent active participation and exploration of supportive settings for improving their English language capacity.

The lack of English language capacity presents systemic challenges that significantly undermine classroom efficiency and effectiveness for Chinese international students. Limited academic vocabulary and poor listening comprehension frequently cause Chinese international students to miss critical information and opportunities for classroom engagement. Compounding these challenges, many Chinese international students internalise an "absolute correctness" mentality, a legacy of traditional Chinese classrooms, which heightens their fear of making mistakes when speaking English (Peng, 2024).

Moreover, it is often evident that many Chinese international students have not engaged with native speakers of English or immersed themselves in the surrounding cultural context of Australia. Thus, their self-initiatives to develop understanding of new classroom culture, English colloquial usage and intercultural competence are very important.

From students: acquiring knowledge of intercultural etiquette

The survey results revealed challenges related to knowledge of interactional etiquette; many Chinese international students acknowledged limited prior knowledge of local norms regarding addressing tutors' titles, as Student 7 observes:

来之前我是没有了解过的，压根儿没想过这个问题，因为以前都是叫XX老师XX教授什么的，一种尊称。来了这边后才明白原来老师学生之间可以直接称呼名字。不敢想象在国内你要是敢在课堂上直呼老师大名会是什

么样的结果。 [*Before I came here, I had no idea about any of this—I'd never even thought about it, because back home we always call people "Teacher X" or "Professor X" as a sign of respect. It wasn't until I got here that I realised teachers and students just call each other by first names. I can't even imagine what would happen if you dared to call your teacher by their first name in a Chinese class!*] (Student 7, October 12, 2023)

Student 7's description reveals a clear gap in cross-cultural knowledge regarding appropriate forms of address in Australian classroom contexts. Before coming to Australia, in China's high power-distance society (Hofstede, 2011), calling teachers by their first names is considered disrespectful and was completely outside their prior experience. This statement illustrates the contrast between Chinese international students' original cultural framework and local practices. In addition, some students demonstrated considerable confusion regarding knowledge of the tutors' title. As Student 4 mentioned:

这个问题确实提醒我了，刚来的时候我一直以为和国内一样称呼是XX老师，没有了解过这个问题。后来有一次我的tutor在全班说，在这边你们直接叫我名字就好了，还有她说发邮件也别叫她professor因为她不是professor。最搞笑的是还有人叫她Miss, Mrs.还有Dr各种。就是所有头衔都给她安了个遍。 [*This whole thing really opened my eyes. When I first arrived, I just assumed it was the same as back home and that I'd like to stick with "Teacher X," so I never looked into it. Then one day my tutor told the whole class, "Just call me [first name], that's totally fine here." She even said, "And don't call me 'Professor' in emails either, I'm not a professor." The funniest part was, some people still went through every possible title, Miss, Mrs, Dr ...*] (Student 4, October 10, 2023)

Their uncertainty in addressing tutors illustrates a broader deficiency in their knowledge of Australian title usage, leading to difficulty determining when to use first names or titles appropriately, thus resulting in awkwardness and confusion.

From tutors: English language support in different academic disciplines

Australian tutors in the interviews expressed various strategies of balancing Chinese international students' language capacity with the depth of academic discussions and learning. Concerns and challenges regarding Chinese international students' language capacity include variability in academic vocabulary accumulation, and subject-related new knowledge.

First of all, in an English-medium environment, many Chinese international students may meet the expected academic English standards, but most Australian tutors recognise lack of English language capacity among Chinese international students in the classroom. Tutors noted the variability of students' English language in class, while also emphasizing the weaknesses in the language reserves of most Chinese international students. At the same time, Tutor 1 explained from her professional perspective why English academic language capacity should be taken seriously for Chinese international students. As she reflected:

Obviously, language is extremely important and that you have to make sure you're understanding, particularly in Law, where we're using, you know, legalistic language. I forget sometimes, conceptual ideas don't necessarily easily literally translate into another language, so you have to kind of explain around the concept, not just say the concept. So sometimes that something hasn't easily moved across culture. (Tutor 1, November 01, 2023)

Tutor 1 situated the challenge of English language proficiency within disciplinary practice. In some fields, especially those with a stronger demand for legal and

technical terminology, certain definitions go beyond the scope of standard English proficiency. In such cases, English proficiency is not only about the ability to participate in basic classroom interaction, but also about engaging in more specialised academic discussions.

Tutors' interviews reveal two core issues. The first issue is the gap between Chinese international students' standardised test scores and their actual English language capacity in the classroom context. This raises doubts about the adequacy of standardised tests as reliable indicators of real-world language competence. Classroom experiences suggest that Chinese international students often do not meet the level of interactive proficiency that such examinations are assumed to guarantee.

The second issue relates to the institutional role in balancing gatekeeping and facilitator roles. Institutions are responsible not only for assessing whether students' language proficiency meets the required entry standards but also for supporting tutors in helping students engage effectively in classroom interaction. From this broader perspective, institutional responsibility extends beyond admission checks to the provision of pedagogical and structural support that enables students to achieve academic success. Similarly, Tutor 15 highlights the weakness of the existing support system:

Our support is still a bit too weak and too general. Ideally, I think Chinese international students have a strong desire to learn. With that kind of curiosity. But even when I try to guide them, tutorials still feel like mini lectures. I'm the one talking while they just sit and listen. They don't ask questions unless I call on them. This has gotten even worse since COVID, and I feel like student quality has dropped. At this point, if they just give me some kind of response, I already feel satisfied. Asking questions on their own feels like too much to hope for.

(Tutor 15, March 3, 2025)

Current institutional support is insufficiently targeted to effectively enhance the proactiveness of Chinese international students. As noted by Tutor 15, existing tutorials still represent a superficially interactive environment for these students, often resembling a “mini lecture” format rather than truly participatory learning sessions. Despite tutors’ best efforts to foster spontaneous engagement, student proactiveness remains limited, and classroom experience shows minimal substantive change. Moreover, the lingering impact of COVID-19 remains evident, significantly influencing Chinese international students’ proactiveness, thereby further reducing their classroom participation.

From tutors: using first language for supporting knowledge acquisition

Striking a balance between engaging with Chinese international students in the classroom and facilitating learning emerges as a significant debate for Australian tutors. This also opens up a broader debate about the role of English proficiency versus the use of students’ first language in supporting knowledge acquisition.

On the one hand, as Tutor 13 noted, tutors expressed concern that challenges arising from Chinese international students’ limited English language capacity might lead to issues for overall classroom interaction:

It’s in everyone’s best interest to maintain English as the dominant classroom language. Doing so mostly in Chinese while in Australia might seem counterintuitive. One major reason students choose to study abroad is precisely to improve their language skills, to engage with different ways of learning, and to experience diverse educational contexts. (Tutor 13, February 28, 2025)

On the other hand, some tutors expressed the belief that English is merely a medium of instruction in the process of delivering knowledge. They did not want to force students to participate in English, as this could limit the depth of group discussions.

While using English more is necessary to practise conceptual understanding, it is also crucial for students to deeply grasp knowledge in their own language. As described by Tutor 10:

Ideally, they can use English in the classroom the whole time. But English language [skill] develops more slowly. That might be harder to change in a short space of time. So, this could mean that Chinese could be used for discussion ideas. You know, studying in Australia, just to see what it's like and to experience something different. I think there are good things to compare when you're studying overseas because you're going to learn things from those experiences.

(Tutor 10, December 09, 2023)

Tutor 10's description points to the essence of studying in Australia, which lies in the experience itself rather than being solely target-oriented. He acknowledged the importance of English language capacity in classroom interaction but also argued that language develops through experiences and should not be the only factor that determines academic engagement. The strategic mobilisation of first language resources should be seen as a valid approach. Similarly, Tutor 6 expressed the view that Chinese international students' lower English language capacity was not a major obstacle for discussions. They think that Chinese international students using Chinese to communicate within peer groups could facilitate more in-depth discussions. At the same time, however, Tutor 6 also noted the importance of encouraging Chinese international students to use English in discussions:

I think they tend to feel more comfortable to express their ideas in Chinese with other people who can speak Chinese, so they might ask themselves, "Why are we using English when we can express it more clearly and more easily in Chinese?" Also, like, because we're talking about concepts and ideas, maybe they can

discuss more deeply in Chinese, whereas if you forced them to use English, then their discussion would be limited. So, I think it's, like, a hard question to answer because it's multi-layered. On the other hand, in the long run, if they're going to be using these concepts and points of discussion in English, then it's probably better to practise in English so they can use [the language] in the future. (Tutor 6, November 30, 2023)

These two tutors may be in the minority among Australian tutors in allowing Chinese international students to use Chinese in class discussions, an approach which is not widely accepted in Australian classrooms.

Additionally, Tutor 15 positioned language as a medium of thought and emphasised the importance of English language proficiency. He emphasised that first language serves as a crucial link facilitating cognitive transformation, particularly for Chinese students experiencing transitional challenges:

Language has the power to fundamentally change how someone thinks. Many Chinese students assume that as long as they acquire knowledge, the language doesn't really matter. In the short term, that might be okay, but in the long run, it's not beneficial—especially for students in a transitional stage. I believe the real value of studying abroad lies in entering a completely new environment and exploring opportunities for skill-building, not just studying the same knowledge in a different language. (Tutor 15, March 03, 2025)

Similarly, Tutor 17 adopted a more flexible stance. She stated that developing English language in Australian classrooms should not be viewed as a change, but rather as an opportunity for enhancement:

Of course, if they can bring that knowledge into English discussions, that would be ideal. Like I said before, I don't think they need to completely change the way they learn just because they came here. And I'm definitely not asking them to give up Mandarin after coming to Australia. On the contrary, I actually encourage them to see language as a tool to access resources, whether it's English or Chinese, and use whatever they have to build their own understanding. (Tutor 17, March 22, 2025)

The debates among Australian tutors reveal a significant challenge between maintaining English as the only classroom language and recognizing the pedagogical value of Chinese as a resource for learning. It should be noted that students' reliance on Chinese sometimes appears counterproductive in this discussion, as it may undermine the primary goal of immersion in an English academic environment.

In contrast, some tutors acknowledged that language can be seen as a resource rather than an exclusive standard. However, most tutors emphasised that, in the long term, English language proficiency remains crucial for professional and academic participation and is also important for thinking development.

Both perspectives highlight the important role of language as a mediator. While English proficiency is essential for classroom engagement and academic success, acknowledging students' multilingual resources can also be considered a way to foster intercultural competence.

Language is not just a medium for acquiring knowledge but also reflects a shift in cognitive processes and practical application. Chinese international students often experience significant difficulties with English language expression during classroom interactions, including unfamiliarity with the conventions of English communication and the influence of Chinese modes of thinking on language use. A comparison of descriptions from both Chinese international students and tutors reveals a notable contrast. Chinese international students tend to view language primarily as a tool,

whereas tutors regard language as a vehicle for thought and as an integral part of the classroom interaction experience. This divergence has not been adequately addressed at the institutional level to help Chinese international students appreciate the importance of thinking in English. As a result, many students remain at the level of basic translation rather than developing deeper communicative competence.

5.3.3 Cultural difference

Chinese students' approaches to intercultural learning are often profoundly shaped by the spoon-feeding pedagogical model prevalent in China (Kember, 2016). This model makes them more accustomed to being told what to do rather than learning through concrete examples.

From students: communication norms and expectations for guidance

Chinese international students hope that tutors will guide them in adapting to new norms of learning. For example, Student 9 observed that tutors sometimes assume a level of familiarity beyond what Chinese international students possess. They often overlook the reality that many Chinese international students are still in the process of gradually learning the complexities of the Australian classroom.

我真希望老师们(Tutors)能帮我们适应这里的教学风格。有时候他们可能会觉得我们已经知道这边的课堂是什么样的了。但是说实话，我们根本不知道那么多，都在一点一点的了解。有时候也会犯一些错误，然后会让他们恼火。 [I really wish the teachers (tutors) could help us get used to the teaching style here. Sometimes, they assume we already know how things work in class. But honestly, we don't know that much yet, we're figuring things out bit by bit. Sometimes, we might make a mistake without meaning to, and then the tutor might get a bit frustrated.] (Student 9, October 16, 2023)

This stands in contrast to Kearney and Maakrun's (2020) claims that intercultural competence can be effectively enhanced through didactic means. In reality, the development of intercultural competence requires not only verbal explanation but, more importantly, demonstration and scaffolding within real classroom situations. Only when students can "see" and "do" for themselves can the gap between cultural adaptation and practical application be bridged, thereby reducing misunderstandings and frustration. It is worth reflecting that tutors and institutions often assume that meeting the minimum IELTS language requirement is sufficient to ensure students' interactive competence in class, while overlooking the critical role of intercultural competence.

In addition to knowledge of interaction norms, knowledge of scenario-based cultural differences also plays a crucial role in preventing awkwardness during interactions and facilitating interaction in classrooms. Student 16 clearly illustrated this point through an anecdote about a film scene discussed in class, showing that even seemingly minor details can carry culturally specific meanings that influence classrooms interaction.

我觉得我好像真的对 Australia 的了解有点少，像有一些细节上的东西，尤其是思维方式的不同应该要去多了解。这样就不会在互动中尴尬。[...] 之前有一次和 tutor 讨论拍电影时的一个场景设计，我写的脚本是一个人走进来把啤酒放在桌子上。然后 tutor 摇摇头，我当时不知道怎么回事，心想，哪里错了吗？然后他说，澳洲人不会把啤酒放在桌子上，而是冰箱里。因为澳洲夏天很热，而且没有人愿意喝温啤酒。我当时就发现思维方式真的是不同的，就有一些细节上的东西。 [I feel like I actually don't know that much about Australia culture. There are a lot of little things, especially differences in the way people think, that I should really try to understand more. That way, it won't be so awkward when interacting with others. For example, there was this one time when I was discussing a film scene with my

tutor. In my script, a character walks in and puts a beer on the table. But my tutor shook his head, and I was confused, I was thinking, did I write something wrong? Then he said, “In Australia, people don’t leave beer on the table, they put it in the fridge.” Because summers in Australia are really hot, and no one wants to drink warm beer. That’s when I realised, oh, the way people think really is different, even in these small details.] (Student 16, October 20, 2023)

Chinese international students demonstrated clear awareness of their limited intercultural knowledge. Interactions with tutors brought attention to overlooked cultural details, revealing specific episodes of communication awkwardness stemming from such oversights. Students increasingly recognised that intercultural communication requires not merely vocabulary and grammar mastery but also a profound understanding of cultural contexts, thought processes, and social etiquette.

From tutors: facilitating common ground and accepting differences

Most tutors in the interview expressed willingness to support Chinese international students. Tutor 1 noted gaps in students’ understanding of cultural concepts, highlighting the importance of clarifying implicit ideas to facilitate effective classroom communication:

Understanding culture is more important in terms of the classroom because, as they say, it’s about making them feel that they can answer questions and avoid embarrassment. Interestingly, when I was talking social justice, I think social justice is not necessarily an intuitive concept for the Chinese students, so I had to talk a little bit about what that means. If you want them join in, you have to let them know what was that, this is the way to avoid embarrassment, like nobody responding in class. (Tutor 1, November 01, 2023)

In Western educational contexts, social justice functions not only as an academic subject but also as a guiding sociocultural paradigm through which educators promote diverse voices and critical inquiry. However, Chinese international students frequently lack the cognitive framework necessary to apprehend these tacit cultural distinctions and thus have only a superficial grasp of the concept's deeper implications. Merely conveying explicit, surface-level information about social justice does little to enhance their interactions with tutors; instead, it is imperative to employ explicit knowledge deliberately to fill the gaps in students' tacit cultural understanding.

Differences in educational norms also influence Chinese international students' classroom interactions. Consistent with the issues reported by students, tutors have also observed that Chinese international students often exhibit a reluctance to challenge authority. They tend to adopt a teacher-centred, passive listening approach during classroom interactions. The gap between tutors' expectations and students' familiarity with cultural norms represents a crucial factor in classroom interactions. For example, Tutor 14, from the perspective of traditional Chinese education, highlighted the interactional challenges that Chinese international students face in the classroom:

The traditional education system trains Chinese students to memorises content and view teachers' words as authoritative and correct. But they lack the knowledge or perhaps the way of questioning authority, which is quite common in Australian classrooms. (Tutor 14, March 3, 2025)

Tutor 14 pointed out that the traditional Chinese education system encourages students to memorise content and regard teachers as infallible sources of knowledge (Xu, 2022a). It places little emphasis on questioning authority (Langen & Roßnagel, 2023), a practice that is starkly different from that of typical Australian classrooms.

Tutor 14 framed interactional challenges not merely as individual shortcomings, but as products of cultural differences. In Chinese education, the transmission of knowledge is prioritised, whereas Australian education emphasises dialogue, critique, and independent thinking. In this way, the tutor highlighted the differences between the two educational cultures and implicitly suggested that students should become familiar with the expectations of Australian classrooms.

Additionally, Tutor 15 argued that cultural differences cannot be bridged solely by verbal explanations from tutors; rather, he sharply pointed out that practical examples are essential for Chinese students to gain a deeper understanding of these cultural differences in context:

Chinese students have a very limited understanding of the local culture and classroom interactions. I've tried explaining to them how our classes typically run, but it didn't seem to have much effect. Eventually, I realised they might have become numb to that preaching style of teaching. I think what they really need right now is concrete, tangible examples that clearly demonstrate what these classroom practices actually look like. (Tutor 15, March 3, 2025)

Tutor 15, who possesses a Chinese cultural background, elucidated a critical issue concerning the classroom experiences of Chinese international students. Initially, he attempted to convey the norms of classroom interaction in Australian universities through a traditional Chinese didactic approach. However, after several iterations, he observed that this method yielded little tangible effect. He highlighted a particularly valuable insight, noting that Chinese international students may have become desensitised to didactic and abstract forms of instruction, which renders their understanding of Australian classroom norms rather limited. He suggests that, rather than simply telling students what to do, it is more effective to engage them through practical, concrete examples. These examples allow for direct experience and

understanding of classroom interaction, thereby fostering the development of intercultural competence.

Similar with previously articulated by Student 9, who expressed a desire for tutors to explicitly teach Australian classroom interactional knowledge. Actually, the challenge does not lie in the students' unwillingness to acquire such knowledge. Rather, as Tutor 15 also recognised, Chinese international students are already deeply accustomed to conceptual explanations. As the Chinese common saying aptly puts it, “理论九段，实践为零” (theoretically proficient at the highest level, but practically inept), indicating a significant disconnect between theoretical understanding and practical application.

Thus, confronted with this predicament, he proposed a valuable practical approach, employing observable and replicable methods to translate abstract classroom interaction knowledge into concrete steps. This strategy effectively facilitated Chinese international students' understanding of the interactive norms in Australian classrooms. Fundamentally, this pedagogical logic aligns with the explicit instruction framework (Hughes, 2017). The Australian Education Research Organisation (2024) advocates a combination of structured goals, worked examples, guided practice, and immediate feedback. It contends that supporting learners facing both linguistic and cultural barriers requires the provision of clear knowledge, relevant examples, guided practice, and prompt feedback. Consistent with Chen and Curdt-Christiansen's (2024) argument, the participation of Chinese international students cannot be achieved solely through theoretical knowledge; rather, students must be guided to engage in practice and receive validation, thereby fostering sustained and frequent participation.

Tutor 2 also emphasised the importance of understanding each other's cultural differences and providing training in this area. For example, by critiquing colleagues' “frightening generalisations” about Chinese students, the tutor illustrated how cultural differences can be oversimplified into stereotypes within academic discourse:

There's so much work that needs to be done. It's an issue from the top down. I've said in committee meetings where, you know, my non-Chinese colleagues make all sorts of terrible generalisations about Chinese students. I find it offensive. There's such a lack of understanding, I don't really know where he [the non-Chinese colleague] starts with that type of thing, but I just think he has to learn. He has to realise that valuing Chinese students is helping everyone. So, the best way is for both [students and tutors] to try and understand each other's communication norms. That's the key to successful interaction in classrooms.]

(Tutor 2, November 14, 2023)

Tutor 2 shifts the focus from students' understanding of cultural differences to the responsibilities of tutors and institutions in fostering intercultural understanding. The responsibility for recognizing cultural differences cannot rely on Chinese international students or Australian tutors; it requires structural support. The persistence of stereotyping in committee meetings indicates that institutional cultures may reproduce deficit discourses about Chinese international students. Such practices risk reinforcing stereotypes and may result in serious confrontation. She sharply pointed out the responsibility of educators and institutions to address these challenges, emphasizing the need to reduce the negative influence of stereotypes on Chinese international students.

These challenges, however, also create opportunities for improvement. Tutor 2 emphasised the need from a professional and market-oriented perspective to address cultural stereotyping to achieve mutual benefit. She argued that educational institutions should prioritise intercultural competence as a collective policy goal. Implementing such a policy would enhance understanding of the student body, particularly Chinese international students, and facilitate more effective and appropriate classroom interactions.

Both Tutor 6 and Tutor 15's observations indicate that effective interaction and comprehension rely fundamentally on mutual understanding, which in turn supports Chinese international students in enhancing their intercultural competence. However, the identified gap between institutional intentions and actual classroom practice exposes a critical deficiency: the absence of sustained, systematic support and explicit guidance for Chinese international students.

5.4 Summary and concluding marks

Intercultural competence is a comprehensive competence, not just a single point. Chinese international students need to deal with knowledge factors in communication patterns, cultural norms, and social behaviours that are different from those in China in Australian classrooms.

Overall, the quantitative analysis of the knowledge factors highlights three major challenges faced by Chinese international students in Australian classrooms. First, they show a lack of awareness of classroom communication, which limits their ability to interpret instructors' expectations and to respond appropriately in discussions. Second, they face barriers in language proficiency, particularly a lack of confidence in using accurate academic vocabulary, grammar, and disciplinary terminology. This creates obstacles to oral participation and to understanding feedback from instructors. Third, they have limited knowledge of classroom interaction norms, especially when negotiating rules and practices that differ from those in their Chinese educational background.

The qualitative findings report on the current knowledge factors which have influenced Chinese international students in Australian classrooms from the perspectives of both Chinese international students and their Australian tutors, focusing on challenges in three key areas identified in the survey. The findings have shown insights on the knowledge gaps that influence Chinese international students' classroom interactions.

The qualitative findings revealed the reason behind three major knowledge-related challenges. First, Chinese international students exhibit limited awareness, hindering their ability to accurately interpret tutors' expectations and actively participate in classroom discussions because they still valued exam-oriented, teacher-centred classrooms in China. When entering Australian classrooms, they have made slow transitions to the participatory learning environment that emphasises open dialogue, independent thinking, and critical reflection. Due to their limited awareness, this shift often occurs as cultural shocks and resistance. Without training or preparation and support from their tutors and institutions Chinese international students have difficulties to develop conscious awareness of how to engage in interactive classroom engagement. The lack of awareness of Australian classroom practices has created confusion and apprehension that result in their passive and minimal participation. These problems are identified by both students and tutors in interviews. Findings indicate that consciously understanding and adapting to new classroom environments can transform initial fear and uncertainty into opportunities for growth. This transformation is crucial for enhancing their intercultural competence and fostering a more inclusive and engaging academic experience.

Second, English language capacity was identified as the most challenging part, with significant struggles in vocabulary, grammar, and listening comprehension. Students often relied on direct translations from Chinese, which caused inappropriate vocabulary choices, grammatical errors, and misinterpretations of informal expressions. Listening comprehension was also hindered by unfamiliar accents and colloquial usage, making classroom interactions stressful and confusing. While tutors can recognise Chinese international students' language barriers, institutional systematic support is often identified as absent, and Australian tutors can only rely on their own efforts to facilitate classroom interactions with students. Importantly, tutors highlighted the need for institutions to move beyond admission-level language checks and provide structured, ongoing support that integrates linguistic development with

intercultural competence training. Without such systemic interventions, Chinese international students remain at risk of isolation and misunderstanding, and tutors may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes.

Third, students demonstrated limited knowledge of classroom norms and cultural practices, particularly regarding interactional etiquette and differing expectations of teaching and learning. Indeed, inadequate familiarity with Australian classroom norms among Chinese international students often leads to barriers, misunderstandings, and reduced teaching effectiveness. Chinese international students struggled to understand the implicit norms of Australian classrooms. Many held expectations of “spoon-feeding” teaching styles, where tutors would provide step-by-step guidance rather than facilitating exploratory discussions. However, tutors noted that simply telling students what to do was insufficient. They think what students truly needed were practical, tangible examples of classroom interaction, enabling them to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and lived practice.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that there exists a debate among tutors regarding the relationship between Chinese international students’ language proficiency and knowledge acquisition. Some tutors believe that forcing Chinese international students to use English may limit the depth of their discussions, and that using their mother tongue might facilitate deeper understanding. Other tutors argue that it is necessary to encourage Chinese international students to use English more in classroom discussions to help them adapt to the English academic environment. Tutors are also aware of their roles in intercultural communication and strive to adjust their teaching methods. Simultaneously, they attempt to understand the differences in educational backgrounds and teaching methods, aiming to create supportive and inclusive learning environments while also addressing cultural misunderstandings and biases.

In addition, same with the affective factor, statistical analysis showed that personality traits were significantly associated with overall knowledge factors,

indicating that extroverted students tend to be aware of a dialectic classroom environment and more likely to have the ability to understand new language and culture norms. Conversely, students with more introverted tendencies often remain cautious and reserved, limiting their exposure to diverse communicative practices and thereby slowing their progress in acquiring the intercultural knowledge needed for effective participation in Australian classrooms.

Overall, Chinese international students' intercultural competence requires addressing both knowledge gaps and institutional shortcomings. Students must develop communication awareness, mastery of academic English language, and understanding of cultural norms to fully engage in Australian classrooms. Tutors, meanwhile, play a critical role in modelling effective communication and providing scaffolding through examples rather than mere explanations. For institutions, creating systematic frameworks support for tutors is also essential to facilitate Chinese international students' awareness, English language and culture differences. By transforming fear and confusion into confidence and proactive engagement, Chinese international students can achieve deeper learning outcomes and contribute meaningfully to intercultural dialogue in higher education.

Chapter 6 Behaviour factors of Chinese international students' intercultural competence

6.1 Introduction

Behavioural factors represent the output and outcome stage of intercultural competence, where rational knowledge is applied in actual multicultural classrooms (Hamaniuk et al., 2024). For Chinese international students, this stage involves demonstrating effective and appropriate behaviours in classroom interactions. It includes the use of accurate and unambiguous language, the adoption of contextually appropriate actions, sensitivity to the flow of interaction, and flexible responses to different interaction scenarios in classrooms.

This chapter focuses on behaviour factors of intercultural competence, addressing the following research questions.

RQ3 What are the behaviour factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why?

RQ3-1 What are the language use of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

RQ3-2 What are the behaviour norms of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

RQ3-3 What are the sensitivity of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

RQ3-4 What are the flexibility of Chinese international students and expectations from Australian tutors?

This chapter presents the research findings from surveys and interviews on the behavioural factors of intercultural competence among Chinese international students in Australian classrooms, from perspectives of language use, behaviour norms, communication sensitivity and flexibility.

This chapter comprises four sections. The first section 1 is an introduction, outlining the general structure of the chapter. The second section 2 reports the survey

data on the Chinese international students' challenges of current language use, behavioural norms, communicative sensitivity, and flexibility.

The third section 3 reports findings from qualitative data from interviews, examining classroom interactions by focusing on prevalent issues identified through the survey. Sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.2 report how the language use and classroom behavioural norms of Chinese international students influence their intercultural competence within Australian classrooms. Section 6.3.3 explores whether Chinese international students are perceptively aware of these influences and examines their perspectives on such influences. Subsequently, section 6.3.4 analyses strategies that students adopt to flexibly address differences in language use and behavioural expectations. The interview data has been analysed via a dual perspective from both students and tutors, combining reflections from Chinese international students regarding their own behavioural outputs and the perspectives of Australian tutors based on an external observation of students' classroom behaviours.

Section 4 will provide a concise summary of the key findings, outlining how behaviour-related challenges influence Chinese international students' classroom interactions with Australian tutors.

6.2 Findings from the survey

This section reports survey findings on the behavioural factors of Chinese international students, with a particular emphasis on their interactions with Australian tutors in Australian classroom settings. The key areas explored within the factors include language use, behavioural norms, communicative sensitivity and flexibility (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Chinese international students' behavioural factors

| | Chinese international students' behavioural factors | | |
|---------------------------|---|---------------|----------|
| | Mean | Std deviation | Variance |
| Language use | 3.54 | 0.58 | 0.33 |
| Behaviour norms | 4.32 | 0.55 | 0.30 |
| Communicative sensitivity | 4.04 | 0.53 | 0.28 |
| Flexibility | 3.87 | 0.57 | 0.33 |

6.2.1 Language use

As shown in Table 6.1, language use is the most challenging of the behaviour factors (M=3.54, SD=0.58). This indicates that, in addition to shortcomings in language proficiency within their knowledge factors, students continue to experience considerable challenges in actual language use. For instance, the item 42 “I can use local language appropriately in classrooms” received a relatively low score (M=3.31), with only 38.89% expressing confidence in interacting with Australian tutors.

From a demographic perspective, postgraduate students reported the lowest mean score in language use (M=3.48), possibly due to the shorter duration of their programs (1.5–2 years), which provides less time for gradual improvement. Conversely, PhD students, who typically engage in longer-term study, reported slightly stronger language use due to sustained exposure to academic English.

6.2.2 Behaviour norms

Chinese international students responded with relatively high scores on behavioural norms (M=4.32, SD=0.55). For example, item 49, “I would strive for a harmonious environment when I have different opinions”, received a high rating (M=4.26), with near-universal agreement (94.91%). Despite studying in Australia and being exposed to a different cultural environment, many Chinese international students continue to adhere to behavioural norms typical of their home culture. They tend to maintain harmonious interactions, respect hierarchical differences, and avoid open conflict. This reflects the enduring influence of cultural socialisation on their classroom

practices. These were confirmed and further contextualised through interviews, revealing additional underlying reasons and constructive suggestions.

Despite the stability of these norms, the survey also found that high adherence to harmony and respect can lead to communicative misunderstandings, particularly when combined with limited English language use. Misinterpretations may arise when students avoid direct disagreement, leading tutors to mistakenly assume comprehension or consensus.

6.2.3 Communicative sensitivity

Regarding communicative sensitivity ($M=4.04$, $SD=0.53$), Chinese international students exhibited relatively high caution, carefully monitoring their interactions to avoid misunderstandings or inappropriate behaviours. Many students fear inadvertently breaching cultural or academic norms, leading to a tendency toward self-monitoring and restrained participation. While such caution can help prevent overt miscommunication, it can also reduce spontaneity and confidence, ultimately limiting effective interaction.

From a demographic perspective, gender differences were minimal, with males showing slightly higher average sensitivity but females demonstrating more consistent responses. Personality traits also played a role: students with more extroverted dispositions reported greater ease in interpreting social cues, while introverted students expressed higher anxiety about misunderstanding tutors or peers.

6.2.4 Flexibility

Flexibility received a moderate score ($M=3.87$, $SD=0.57$), students demonstrating some capacity for adaptability, albeit not primarily employed to enhance interaction quality. For example, in the item 38 “I can express my thoughts in different ways” ($M=3.65$), confidence was limited (49.10%), indicating constraints in expressing ideas flexibly. Interestingly, discrepancies emerged between observed

student flexibility and tutors' expectations, a topic explored further in the results and discussion sections. Many students struggle to reformulate ideas when initial attempts are not understood, especially when interactive classroom context is involved. This lack of flexibility can lead to stalled interactions and missed learning opportunities.

Age-related patterns revealed that younger students (<22 years) displayed greater variability in flexibility ($SD=0.61$, $SD=0.37$). While some excelled at adapting to new environments, others struggled to adjust, reflecting differences in prior intercultural exposure and educational experiences. In contrast, older students demonstrated more consistent, albeit not necessarily higher, flexibility, likely due to accumulated life experience.

The slight decline in flexibility scores from undergraduates to doctoral students may reflect the increased specialisation and focus on higher levels of study, which could limit the breadth of adaptability

In addition, from an overall result, there is a significant negative correlation between the current level of academic study and behaviour factors ($\beta=-.142$, $p<.05$). Students at higher academic levels may rely more on past patterns of language use and demonstrate less flexibility in adapting their behaviour to different classroom contexts compared with younger students. Similar to previous chapters, personality traits still demonstrated a significant positive correlation with overall performance in behaviour factors ($\beta=0.189$, $p<.01$), underscoring the critical role of personality in intercultural development. Specifically, students who are more open, extroverted, and emotionally stable tended to manage interactions more effectively and actively participate in discussions, a point widely affirmed by tutor interviews. It should be noted that the small sample sizes for extreme personality groups (extremely introverted and extremely extroverted) might affect the representativeness of the results, indicating a need for studies with larger sample sizes to further validate these findings.

The results highlight both the strengths and challenges of Chinese international students' behaviour experience. The following qualitative analysis seeks insight from these survey results to understand how Chinese international students and their tutors perceive the behaviour factors have influenced classroom interactions and how Chinese international students are negotiated in practice.

6.3 Findings from interview data

6.3.1 English language use

The importance of accurate English language usage cannot be overstated in intercultural interactions. It is evident that English language usage is the lowest-scoring area in behaviour factors. Chinese international students had primary concerns for their English language use. Findings from the survey also reveal that Chinese international students have faced difficulties in their classroom interactions with tutors and this hinders their ability to engage with Australian tutors. Therefore, avoiding misunderstandings and employing more appropriate English usage have become urgent needs for Chinese international students to effectively participate in classrooms and interactions.

From students: using colloquial English and communicating with native speakers

In the interviews students reported they have faced a more informal mode of English language use in classrooms than they have learnt in China. The formal English usage by international Chinese students is regarded as out of place [*gegeburu*] and abnormal in Australian culture. Student 19 majoring in Theatre Studies expressed her observation and the challenges for interactions with their tutors:

因为本来我们之前在国内学英语，大家学的就是相当于比较正规的比较 formal tone，然后来了这边之后呢？澳大利亚本地的这个文化语言习惯是大家比较轻松，比较随和无拘无束随便的这种感觉。所以他们有时候会觉得说我说话有点太过正式，包括我现在想，因为我们专业要写剧本。然后

剧本里面，现在你交给老师的肯定是英文版本的，然后他就会觉得说你的这个人物语言都太过的 *formal*，包括平时说话交流的时候，他们就会觉得你可以多去跟本地人沟通啊，多去看一看他们的生活情景剧啊，去了解一下啊。由于这个文化或者行为习惯，影响了这个语言习惯。可能就是我觉得在跟老师交流的时候会有一些些的小阻碍。 [*Previously, when we were studying English in China, we learned a very formal tone. However, after coming here, I noticed that the Australian local culture and language habits are quite relaxed, casual, and unrestrained. So, they might feel that the way I speak is too formal. For instance, in my major, we have to write scripts as our assignments, and the scripts we submit to the teacher are in English. They often think that the characters' dialogue is too formal. They suggest that I communicate more with locals and watch their sitcoms to understand better. The cultural or behavioural habits here influence our language habits. This cultural and linguistic difference causes some minor obstacles when communicating with my teachers.*] (Student 19, October 23, 2023)

As reported from the student above, tutors have made suggestions for them to change their formal language use habit by more communications with local Australian people and adopting the colloquial language use. Adapting to and mastering local language habits are particularly important for Chinese international students. Chinese students are accustomed to highly formal language styles grounded in theoretical frameworks (Fan, 2019). Similar to Guo and Zhang (2019), one of the findings is that students recognise that it is not difficult to perceive differences between varieties of English; Chinese English and Australian English possess distinct characteristics.

From tutors: distinguishing between written and oral communication

Most Chinese international students have problems distinguishing between written and spoken English language usage in their conversations. In the interviews

some tutors identified the problem that Chinese international students often use written English as spoken English in classroom interactions. Tutor 10, who is tutoring in Theatre Studies, noted:

This often comes down to the difference between spoken and written English language. From what I've seen, Chinese international students tend to be stronger in writing, but one issue is that when they speak in class, their responses sometimes take on a written tone. For example, they'll say things like "I do not think" or "I do not agree with you", instead of more conversational phrases like "I don't think so," or "No way". Of course, using more formal spoken English isn't wrong at all, we totally get it, and it's really not a big deal in most classroom settings. But if you're studying something like film or screenwriting here, especially when it comes to writing dialogue for characters, then this could become a problem. It might lead to characters sounding unnatural or fake to the audience. (Tutor 10, December 9, 2023)

This transference from a formal written register to spoken interaction exemplifies a specific challenge within students' English language use. Although the use of formal spoken language typically does not disrupt classroom interactions, it warrants attention in courses that demand authentic, culturally grounded communication. The mismatch between written and spoken registers highlights a potential deficiency in students' pragmatic abilities to adapt their communicative styles to specific genres. This deficiency may, in turn, limit their active engagement in classroom discussions.

From students: learning to use direct expressions

Similar to challenges in shifting between formal and informal usage in English, the habits in English language use are closely tied to the issue of direct versus indirect expression. In Chinese culture, asking questions directly is regarded as impolite. For

example, Student 3 noted that students often use indirect expression in classrooms when they ask questions. This style of English language use often contrasts with the direct and informal interaction preferred in Australian classrooms.

因为很多障碍它是文化夹杂在语言里面那种习惯造成的。比如说那个间接表达的问题吧。我之前观察过很多，咱们中国学生在课堂上问问题都比较含蓄，拐弯抹角的那样。老师可能还得去猜你想要问什么问题。 [Many obstacles are caused by cultural habits intertwined with language use. For example, there's the issue of indirect expression. I've noticed that many Chinese students tend to ask questions in a roundabout way in class. The teachers have to guess what we're trying to ask.] (Student 3, October 10, 2023)

As indicated by Student 3, Chinese international students tend to ask questions indirectly and in a more reserved manner in the classroom. This reserved expression can be perceived as unclear articulation, or lack of confidence, thereby hindering effective communication between students and tutors. By observing and reflecting the differences between their own culture and Australian culture, students proactively take actions to adjust the expressions.

From students: avoiding upsetting tutors and aiming to get high grades

In Chinese culture, implicitness and indirect expression are common modes of communication (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). In this study, some Chinese international students often indicated they relied on indirect expression in interactions through cautious speech and a reluctance to expose potential errors in their viewpoints. For example, as Student 10 noted, indirect expression is typical in Chinese culture but can lead to communication gaps in the Australian classroom context. They also are concerned that they will be punished by getting lower marks:

有时候不同意的话也不会说我不同意你的看法，生怕说错话惹的tutor不高兴然后给低分 [When we don't agree with something, we usually won't say something like "I disagree with your point", because we're afraid of saying the wrong thing or upsetting the tutor and maybe getting a lower grade because of it.] (Student 10, October 16, 2023)

Student 10 highlighted the concerns of “upsetting tutors” exhibited by most Chinese international students in classrooms; an approach deeply rooted in cultural values such as harmony maintenance, face-saving, and respect for authority (Hofstede, 2009). This high level of caution can lead to unintended ambiguity in communication. In Western low-context classroom environments, such communicative styles may be misunderstood, because clarity, directness, and critical engagement are more highly valued (Chen & Starosta, 2000). While Chinese students' caution functions as a culturally grounded strategy to show respect and avoid conflict, it may inadvertently hinder their active participation in Australian classrooms.

From tutors: supporting students and listening with patience

Many Australian tutors in the interviews reported they employ various strategies to support students to overcome these language-use related challenges. Tutor 9 stated:

When I hear an unfamiliar expression, or when there's confusion between, say, gerunds and infinitives, my first reaction is often a bit of confusion because I can't quite catch the exact meaning they're trying to convey. In those moments, I usually let them finish what they're saying, then try to guess the intended meaning based on the overall context. After that, I'll gently guide them by repeating what they said but using the correct or more natural wording, kind of like a form of corrective repetition. (Tutor 9, December 10, 2023)

As Tutor 9 stated, the mistakes in using English gerunds and infinitives by Chinese students have caused confusion in classrooms because of a significant linguistic difference between Chinese and English. Chou (2024) pointed out that Chinese students frequently misuse gerunds as infinitives when translating from Chinese to English, leading to misunderstandings among native English speakers during interactions. However, tutors such as Tutor 9 have supported students by using strategies such as patient listening and corrective repetition to maintain effective communication.

Barriers of English language use are one of the most direct challenges for Chinese students in Australian classrooms. Despite the supportive efforts of Australian tutors, Chinese international students still have problems to overcome these obstacles. The frequent “back and forth” exchanges between students and tutors can be time-consuming and impact communication efficiency in classrooms. Tutors stated in the interviews that they understood that English is the second language of Chinese international students and their expressions may contain improper word usage, making it difficult to understand their true intentions. While repeated clarifications and explanations can help resolve misunderstandings, they can also consume a significant amount of time, affecting the classroom’s progress.

It is worth noting from the findings that tutors’ supportive teaching philosophies in the classroom context must not be overlooked. As Tutor 13 emphasises, it is crucial to demonstrate understanding of students’ difficulties and respect for students’ efforts in class engagement, as their linguistic limitations may conceal valuable insights. Tutors advocate collaborative meaning-making processes within interactions between tutors and students which can promote mutual understanding.

If you genuinely want to understand what someone is trying to say, it's helpful to

actively support them in finding the right words. Rather than quickly concluding that they have nothing significant to say, you should try different words or clarify their meaning by asking: “Is this what you’re trying to say?” or “Is this the idea you’re aiming for?” (Tutor 13, February 28, 2025)

Tutor 13 further emphasised the importance of active listening during class interactions. Responding by actively listening, paraphrasing, and clarifying can significantly enhance intercultural interaction effectiveness. As with Tutor 13, many tutors have offered opportunities and use different approaches to support Chinese international students to build their English language use in the classrooms.

Expectations from tutors: avoiding impolite or inappropriate online language usage

In recent years technological advancements and online communication tools have been used to assist intercultural communications for English as a second language learners. However, the online English language use has impacted the English linguistic patterns used by Chinese international students. As a tutor with Chinese cultural background observed, online communication tools subtly influence students’ real-life interactions, prompting overly concise and interrogation-like responses. While brevity is acceptable and normal within Chinese contexts, this communicative style can be misinterpreted as impolite or inappropriate within Australian classrooms.

I think the way they [Chinese international students] communicate is, to some extent, influenced by the online communication style back home, like how people talk on WeChat. Whether it’s in class or through email, you can often tell their responses are really short, almost like an interrogation rather than a two-way interaction. And that can be a bit of a barrier for tutors here [in Australia], who might think, “Why is this student being so abrupt or lacking in manners?” (Tutor

17, March 22, 2025)

Tutor 17 highlighted that these English language uses extend from popular Chinese social media platforms, such as WeChat and Weibo. These platforms emphasise efficient and fragmented communication, shaping students' preferences for brief and direct outputs in academic oral and written interactions (Wang & Jiang, 2023). The persistence of previous social habits diminishes their strategic awareness for switching registers, resulting in brief, and direct responses during classroom interactions, resembling interrogations rather than collaborative exchanges. Such responses are frequently misinterpreted by Australian tutors as indicative of disinterest or breaches of etiquette, negatively influencing perceptions of students' academic engagement and discipline.

6.3.2 Behaviour norms

Behavioural norms are guidelines for individual conduct. There are clear and contrasting differences between Chinese and Australian classroom behavioural norms. Different classroom patterns, different levels of power distance, and collectivist approaches to communication all influence teacher–student interaction. These factors directly determine the effectiveness of classroom learning.

From students: taking an appropriate moment to speak, not interruptions of others

Differences in cultural perspectives on classroom interactions highlight the broader contrasts between societal values in Australia and China. The differences represent both a communication gap and an opportunity to embrace new cultural values. For example, Student 4's experience illustrates how cultural norms influence perceptions, which in turn affect discussions in the classroom:

我觉得这种行为[打断]是一种不礼貌的。因为可能我没有办法界定什么时

候说话，就是说插他的话，我有时候想补充的时候，就我也我不知道这时候是不是合适的时候。因为我可能不太知道西方的这个这种课堂礼仪文化尤其是 *tutorial* 这种小课。我觉得我表达方式不好，或者说我觉得表达方式可能会冒犯 *Tutor*，还有我觉得这不是一个合适的说话时机。因为我怕我讲的东西可能完全的就是跟他这个题目是完全不相干，他可能会打断我，然后他可能会觉得我没有认真听这种情况。都是会有这种考虑的。 [I feel this behaviour [interruption] is impolite. Because sometimes I don't know when to speak is appropriate. When I want to add something, I'm unsure if it's the right time, because I'm not familiar with the classroom norms, especially in tutorials. I feel that if I don't express myself appropriately, I might offend the tutor, or it might not be an appropriate moment to speak. I'm afraid that what I say might be incorrect, and they might interrupt me, or think that I haven't been listening attentively. These are the things I consider.] (Student 4, October 10, 2023)

As the student expressed above, in China, interrupting others during classroom communication and social interactions is often considered rude and impolite. Although interruption is also considered rude in the Australian culture, in the context of classroom discussions such interruptions are accepted as normal behaviour, to allow more open and proactive Australian classrooms. Students are encouraged to actively participate in class, posing questions or making personal comments whenever necessary, which is viewed as a sign of active engagement and critical thinking (Rezai et al., 2025). Nevertheless, knowing when and how to interrupt or interject in a conversation requires intercultural knowledge of local etiquette, which emerges from cultural understanding.

From students: teachers are above us and they are always right

Extending from the discomfort with interruptions in the class discussions another issue is the power distance and relationship with tutors. The Chinese traditional cultural norms and behavioural practices have also influenced the way Chinese

international students habitually interact with their tutors. Chinese international students often position their teachers as authority figures. When asked to describe their perceptions of the classroom environment in Australia, they frequently emphasise this hierarchical perspective. Some Chinese international students reported they felt Australian tutors were above them and can't be challenged, as Student 7 stated:

我们总觉得老师高高在上。我们在中国一贯的不断的输入尊师教育,, 然后就是这种灌输我们就是觉得老师就是对的, 就是很少有这种质疑老师的情况. [...] 到最后都感觉你一说出来你就是错的那种慌张。而且当我们发现 tutor 哪点讲错的话, 会考虑要不要指出来, 或者在指出 tutor 错误的时候可能会委婉一点, 就是中国人的中庸啊, 但是澳洲学生可能就是很直接对就是对, 错就是错, 没有这些弯弯绕绕。 [We tend to see teachers as being above us. Our education has always been about constantly receiving input, and we just kind of accept that the teacher is always right. There's rarely a situation where people question the teacher. ... In the end, it even feels kind of nerve-wracking to speak up, like once you say something, you're the one in the wrong. And when we do notice a tutor saying something that's not quite right, we actually hesitate, like, should we point it out? And even if we do, we'd probably do it in a really polite, indirect way. That's just the Chinese way, this idea of keeping balance. But in Australia, it's way more direct; right is right, wrong is wrong, no beating around the bush.] (Student 7, October 12, 2023)

As stated by Student 7 Chinese international students exhibit a high respect for their tutors as the authority in the classroom, viewing tutors as possessing absolute academic and professional authority. This behaviour stems from the hierarchy and power distance in Chinese culture. The education they received in China emphasises respect for teachers and instils the belief that “the teacher is always right”.

Consequently, the Chinese culture influenced these students to accept the opinions of Australian tutors without questioning them. These behaviours may be interpreted as a lack of critical thinking in Australian classrooms.

When Chinese international students were encouraged to express personal opinions, they tended to focus on choosing an appropriate moment to speak, reflecting the cultural value of respecting authority. In Chinese culture, teachers are regarded as figures of high status and are often perceived as always being correct. This respect has influenced students' development of intercultural competence, as they learned to balance their traditional deference to authority with adapting to new classroom norms that encourage open dialogue, critical thinking, and active participation.

From students: influence of collectivist culture

Similar to the perspectives of high-power distance exhibited by Chinese international students, collectivist thinking remains a dominant factor influencing their classroom interactions. Interview data reveal that some Chinese international students often hold internal doubts about whether their responses represent the interests of the entire group and whether asking questions will be of use to their group in the class. Student 18 explained:

在我想回答问题的时候脑子里总是担心，就是我的回答是否能代表大家，问问题时候想是不是大家都有这个问题。我问问题会不会对大家造成困扰或者是浪费别的学生们的时间。因为可能他们没什么疑问。 [When I want to answer a question, I was concerned, wondering if my response represents everyone else's thoughts. When I ask questions, I worry whether my question might inconvenience others or waste their time, especially if they don't have the same questions.] (Student 18, October 21, 2023)

Student 18 reflects the concern for collective interests and apprehension about potential negative impacts on other students. In China a collectivist culture has been

encouraged; individual actions are seen as part of the group. This culture has influenced some students such as Student 18 to consider the group's reaction and overall harmony when expressing personal opinions. Some students also expressed they exhibit hesitation and lack of confidence in the classrooms when interacting with tutors, worrying about whether their questions or responses are appropriate and whether they might disrupt others. This behaviour highlights an important aspect of understanding behaviour norms. Individuals seek to maintain their cultural characteristics while also adjusting to different behavioural norms and communication styles in a new cultural environment.

From tutors: encouraging individualistic and independent learning

Australia's low power-distance and individualistic orientation inevitably contrast with the high power-distance and collectivist perspectives possessed by Chinese international students, creating potential cultural dissonance in classroom interactions. Most Australian tutors reported they have encouraged students to build independent and individualist perceptives. Tutor 6's observations reveal these student behavioural tendencies and highlight how cultural differences influence teaching strategies.

I think they tend to be more collectivist rather than individualistic. Yeah. So, they probably are quite focused on like the harmony, they don't want to necessarily perhaps disagree with someone directly. If they do disagree, it's possible that they won't show that and they might just stay quiet. I guess that's something I've observed and kind of seen. (Tutor 6, December 5, 2023)

Some Australian tutors stated they have encouraged Chinese international students to bring their own cultural perspectives and experiences into the classroom. They have offered opportunities for students to develop their

independent learning and intercultural competence. As Tutor 1 pointed out, this culture difference is not a problem, but it is an important academic development for students to see both cultural values.

... they've come from a completely different way of thinking ... Asian cultures, they are more collectively understood. So, it doesn't manifest in the way that we're teaching, but in terms of the substance, they have a completely different cultural perspective. So that can be really useful and interesting to kind of tease that out and get them to explore that because it helps all the students realise that there's more than one way of looking at the world. (Tutor 1, Nov 1, 2023)

Findings show that most Australian tutors are sensitive to the cultural norms of Chinese international students. As described by Tutor 7, the focus in Australian classrooms is on promoting student activity and participation, moving away from the “sage on the stage” model where the teacher is the primary source of information. For Chinese international students, this expectation of active engagement can be both a challenge and an expectation from their tutors. Data revealed that most tutors like Tutor 7 have played active roles to train Chinese international students to develop their intercultural competence in Australian classrooms.

I think I'd probably reiterate that Australian classrooms are much more interactive, and the power distance is lower, so Australians are more willing to challenge, speak up, and question. Then I think Chinese students are more inactive and not being very tuned into how people communicate here. It could be their culture that emphasises respect for authority and a more hierarchical classroom structure. Australian classrooms promote more student activity and participation, rather than simply being talked at by a teacher. And there's sort of, there's a phrase, the sage on the stage, rather than, you know, promoting more

communication. That is what I'm not wanting to see in class. (Tutor 7, December 15, 2023)

Chinese international students' learning behaviours are deeply influenced by high power-distance, teacher-centred educational tradition. Chinese international students often adopt passive behaviours, viewing tutors as unquestionable authorities (Hofstede, 2010). This contrasts sharply with the Australian classroom's low power-distance environment, characterised by active questioning, debating, and collaborative knowledge construction. Chen et al. (2024) also observed difficulties among Chinese international students transitioning from hierarchical, transmissive education to highly interactive environments. This mismatch between cultural practices and classroom norms significantly restricts their demonstration of intercultural competence, particularly concerning behavioural norms.

6.3.3 Communicative sensitivity

In classroom interactions, intercultural sensitivity becomes visible in the ways Chinese international students respond to feedback, address their tutors, and display respect. Many students develop sensitivity through tutor feedback, learning to interpret comments not as criticism but as encouragement for deeper thinking.

From students: develop cultural sensitivity from tutor's feedback

In classroom settings, many Chinese international students often expected positive appraisal from tutors. When the appraisal was negative, or when tutors encouraged them to think more deeply instead of offering praise, they often experienced a disappointment. Student 19 reported her reflections on a tutor's feedback:

有一次在课堂上我回答了老师的问题，我觉得我已经表达得还行了吧，但

是老师听完就马上说, 'Well, not exactly' 然后又接着补充了一些内容。当时我一下子就懵了, 脑子里第一反应是不是我说错了? 甚至有点不好意思, 觉得是不是我让老师失望了。后来时间长了我明白这是一种这边的沟通方式, 他们说 *not exactly* 其实是想引导我们往更深的方向去思考而不是国内老师给你判死刑那种感觉, 就是“你不对, 下一个同学来回答”。 [There was this one time in class when I answered a question from the teacher, I thought I had done a pretty decent job but right after I finished, the teacher said, “Well, not exactly,” and then went on to add more information. I was stunned for a moment. My first reaction was, “Did I say something wrong?” I even felt a bit embarrassed, like maybe I'd disappointed the teacher. But over time, I came to understand that this is just a way people communicate here. When they say, “not exactly,” it's not like back home where a teacher might shut you down with a hard “that's wrong, next student”. Instead, it's more about guiding you to think more deeply, not rejecting your answer outright.] (Student 19, October 23, 2023)

Feedback from tutors is a common and important space for students to develop their thinking skills and intercultural competence. A key insight can be drawn from Student 19's response: Chinese international students developed appreciation towards suggestions from their tutors and recognised the importance of interpreting feedback within Australian norms. They may learn to recalibrate their understanding of feedback, developing communicative sensitivities and realising it is intended to stimulate deeper thinking rather than to criticise them.

From students: uncomfortable at addressing teachers by their first name

In Australia, teachers at higher education institutions often encourage students to address them by their first name, in order to develop a good rapport with students. This approach is totally different from teachers in China; it is considered rude behaviour. Findings show that most Chinese international students exhibit high sensitivity to cultural differences, especially regarding classroom communication

habits. As Student 11 described:

刚开始来到这边会小心翼翼的，会怕有什么地方说的不对。举个例子吧，就是刚来的时候老师说：你可以直接叫我的名字，但是我那一阵一直会特别别扭，很多时候还是会叫“teacher”或者是 professor 什么的。感觉直呼名字很不礼貌。然后还有一个就是回答问题，最开始想回答问题的时候不举手总觉得缺点什么，然后还有会习惯性的站起来回答。不然就是不尊重。

[When I first came here, I was very cautious, worried about saying something wrong. For example, when I first arrived, the teacher said I could call them by their first name, but I felt very uncomfortable with that. I would often still call them “Teacher” or “Professor” because calling them by their first name felt impolite. Another example is when answering questions; at first, I always felt something was missing if I didn’t raise my hand, and I had a habit of standing up to answer. Otherwise, it felt disrespectful.] (Student 11, October 17, 2023)

For Chinese international students, who are accustomed to using honorifics, addressing tutors by their first names feels very impolite. Student 11 mentioned their habit of calling teachers “Teacher”, reflecting the Chinese education system. Additionally, raising hands and standing up to answer questions are behaviours associated with respect, but in an Australian classroom these actions can seem unnecessary or even strange. The traditional habits of addressing and classroom behaviour have significant differences from Western culture, which need to be overcome through continuous adaptation and adjustment. Chinese international students need to maintain their cultural characteristics while gradually adapting to new cultural norms to more effectively integrate into the new academic environment.

From tutors: appreciate the respect from Chinese international students

Most tutors believe that Chinese international students calling them by their first

name would appear more in line with their desired traditional culture, but they also appreciate Chinese international students' respect for them, as Tutor 5 stated:

I'm very proud of them. They're extremely polite, they're very respectful, and I wish in Australia we had more of that. In Australian universities, everybody calls you by their first name, which again is unusual because when I first studied at Sydney University many years ago, you would never, ever call any of your lecturers their first names, you needed to address them as Professor or Doctor. You would never use their first name and now it's accepted. It's because Australia's considered egalitarian. I don't know if you've heard of the "tall poppy syndrome". Personally, I think it's a lot of nonsense, but a lot of people feel that way here. The idea is that you shouldn't put yourself above others, which, to me, is a bit strange, but that's just the way it is. So, the Chinese students bring with them a much better sense of manners and a more respectful attitude, and they really understand hierarchy. All this talk about equity and equality is all very well, but hierarchy has its place and it's extremely important, you can't just dismiss it. And the Chinese students really embody these qualities, which I think many academics appreciate. China is, after all, a high-power-distance society. I tell my students, "Just call me [first name]", but when they send me emails, they'll usually address me as Doctor, or Professor. I joke that it's always nice to get a promotion! That's fine too; they do tend to use those honorifics, which, as I said, is a sign of respect that I really hope they don't lose.

(Tutor 5, November 30, 2023)

Tutor 5 is very happy with the politeness and respect demonstrated by Chinese international students when using formal titles. Although Australian universities have shifted towards a more egalitarian culture where first names for addressing academic or professional staff are commonly used, Chinese international students maintained

traditional Chinese culture and respectful manners for the hierarchy, which has been seen as a positive quality enriching the academic environment by some tutors. They often show their respect through the use of titles like “Doctor” or “Professor”, even when tutors encourage the use of first names. This practice highlights the cultural differences and individual preferences by both students and tutors for mutual understanding in an intercultural educational setting.

In response to Chinese international students’ sensitivity to feedback, Australian tutors demonstrated an acute awareness of the power asymmetry inherent in teacher–student relationships and actively sought to mitigate their perceived authority. They emphasised the importance of reciprocal rather than one-way transmission in classroom interaction, as Tutor 4 noted:

Yeah, I want to be approachable, I don't want to feel like I'm way above them or anything, because honestly, they have their own knowledge to share too. I really see teaching as a two-way process. But sometimes I get the sense that they're a bit too nervous or intimidated to talk to me just because of my position, and that's not how I want to come across at all. Like you mentioned, sometimes they'll even call me “Professor”, even though I'm not a professor, that's really just a cultural difference. I've heard from other tutors as well that Chinese international students often do this; they always use that kind of formal address.
(Tutor 4, December 4, 2023)

Tutor 4 emphasised that the teacher–student relationship should be a two-way exchange of knowledge. His reflections highlight an awareness that teaching is not just about imparting knowledge but also about mutual respect and knowledge exchange. The key issue here lies in the challenge presented by the cultural expectations of respect and politeness that Chinese international students bring to the

classroom, contrasted with the more egalitarian Australian approach to addressing authority. For Chinese international students, using formal titles, even incorrectly, is seen as a sign of respect and reverence for authority, which is deeply ingrained in some cultures but less common in Australia's more egalitarian environment. Chinese international students may feel hesitant to participate actively or question authority because they perceive the tutor's status as too high.

Interestingly, tutors with a Chinese cultural background expressed the view that addressing conventions, particularly those related to forms of address, are unlikely to undergo fundamental change among Chinese students. As Tutor 16 stated, it was an uncomfortable experience for her to address people who were older than her by their first name:

Even though I've been here for 10 or 20 years, I still find it hard to directly call older people by their first names ... The influence of Chinese culture is still there. For example, calling an older man by his first name creates this unexpected sense of intimacy, and deep down it just feels like that kind of closeness doesn't belong in our interaction. So, I completely understand that this kind of interactional norm is something that can't easily be overcome. If Chinese students can't bring themselves to call me by my first name in class, that's totally fine, I get it. (Tutor 16, March 13, 2025)

In Chinese culture, sensitivity in interactions is also reflected in forms of address, which extend beyond power distance to considerations of respect and politeness. Addressing others appropriately is not only a reflection of cultural identity but also shapes modes of intercultural interaction. As a result, even in Australian classroom environments that encourage the use of first names, both Chinese students and tutors with Chinese cultural backgrounds may feel uncomfortable or choose to retain

traditional forms of address when referring to someone older or in a higher position. This behaviour demonstrates a high level of sensitivity to interactional norms and a strong adherence to cultural values in intercultural contexts.

Moreover, the sensitivity of Chinese international students is also reflected in the distinction between high- and low-context. They often follow a high-context pattern, in which meaning is conveyed through implicit cues and shared understanding (Hall & Hall, 1990). This behaviour pattern makes Chinese international students particularly attentive to whether others can accurately interpret their intentions during intercultural interactions.

This form of cultural sensitivity can be understood as a key internal behavioural shift for the students (Deardorff, 2006). It also represents part of the later stage of acceptance of difference (Bennett, 1986). At this stage, students are able to evaluate both the strengths and the weaknesses of cultural differences with a rational perspective. At the same time, they gradually attempt to respond and adapt through a more affective mode of engagement. This process embodies the intellectual path of “returning from rationality to sensibility”. Their sensitivity to cultural norms makes Chinese international students particularly cautious in intercultural interactions. For Chinese international students, a high-context cultural background makes them particularly attentive to how their intentions are interpreted. This cultural background influences their behaviour and interaction pattern in classroom contexts. In contrast, Australian tutors operate within a low-context framework, where clarity and explicitness are emphasised. As a result, Chinese international students’ heightened sensitivity becomes an asset, allowing them to recognise important cues, and a challenge, as it demands continuous adjustment within a low-context educational environment.

6.3.4 Flexibility

Flexibility is important for adjusting behaviour in response to situational and

cultural differences. As Chung and Ingleby (2011) emphasise, possessing flexibility is indispensable for successful adaptation. For Chinese international students, behavioural flexibility and passive affective adaptation are closely interconnected, with one often reinforcing or accompanying the other. This flexibility is presented in the transition from passive affective adaptation to strategies of active adjustment. Consistent with the affective and behavioural outcomes highlighted in Deardorff's (2009) process model of intercultural competence, flexibility functions as a key component that enables Chinese international students to transform passive adaptation into active behavioural participation in intercultural contexts.

From students: develop flexibility

In the survey, among the factors of intercultural competence, flexibility ranked second lowest after language use by Chinese international students. Findings from interviews, however, indicate Chinese international students began to try new ways of interaction, modifying their way of classroom participation, and developing individualised coping strategies. Data indicated many Chinese international students actively navigated and tried to adopt new classroom norms. As Student 13 described, there was a transitional process by persistent effort and growing their intercultural competence:

我开始尝试不断的以这边的方式去沟通，比如说从进入教室的 greeting 开始。虽然说开始比较痛苦，像是强迫自己去改变去接受这样一个新的教学环境。到后面吧可能自己也是慢慢明白了也接受了，就自然而然的习惯了。 [I started trying to communicate in the local way, starting with greetings when entering the classroom. At first, the process was difficult, as it felt like forcing myself to change and accept a new learning environment; later on, I gradually understood and accepted it, and naturally got used to it.] (Student 13, October 17, 2023)

Chinese international students have adopted flexibility in their progression from passive adaptation to proactive change. As Deardorff's (2006) model suggests, passive affective adjustment, initial emotional discomfort, such as feelings of anxiety, confusion, and alienation, are tightly linked with passive behavioural adaptation. As time passes and affective adaptation begins to shift, behavioural adaptation can follow, students gradually push themselves to speak up, participate, and experiment with new communicative conventions.

Indeed, from this study's findings, we have seen the same development loop: initial emotional pain spurred reactive compliance, followed later by intentional efforts to adapt behaviourally, similar to the experience of struggling with affective adaptation reported by Student 4 in Chapter 4 [Section 4.3.4] who initially also felt disoriented. However, he gradually pushed himself, learning to greet tutors proactively and to adapt during class discussions, which ultimately led to increased confidence and more active engagement. Tutors' effort in auxiliary support is pivotal for facilitating students' behaviour to shift from passive compliance to self-initiated engagement.

As previously emphasised, the tutor's responses in classroom interactions play a pivotal and supportive role in facilitating and advancing students' cycles of intercultural competence development. In this context, timely responses and affirming interactions function as expectancy cues. They help to counteract Golem-type inhibitions (Babad, Inbar, & Rosenthal, 1982) and produce a Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), thereby promoting proactive adaptation and the growth of intercultural competence.

In addition, for many Chinese international students, the development of intercultural competence cannot be completely taught, but is gained through their own observations and experience, and gradually internalised to improve the behaviour, as Student 1, who had studied in Australia for more than two years, reflected on this

experience. This closely echoes the observation of Tutor 15 who noted that developing intercultural competence often requires two to three years, or even longer, and the process is not simply about telling students what to do but a practical example:

来这边两年了，比刚来那会好太多了，不管是如何跟这边的老师沟通还是什么。在我看来，就像你说的这个跨文化能力还得是靠自己。举个例子来说，我记得刚来那会所有老师都在告我们，啊这里不一样，得有 *critical think* 啊什么的，课堂回答问题还是写作业都要求要有这个。但是我觉得这和以前说教没什么两样，对我们帮助不大，或者说根本就是一头雾水。所以说这些很多这种跨文化的东西都是自己慢慢摸索的，吃了很多亏才学会的。 [*I've been here for two years now, and honestly, things are way better than when I first arrived, especially when it comes to communicating with the teachers here and all that. In my opinion, like you mentioned, intercultural competence is really something you have to figure out on your own. For example, I remember when I first got here, all the teachers kept telling us things like, "Oh, things are different here," and "You need to have critical thinking", whether it was for class discussions or assignments. But to be honest, it just felt like the same old preaching we used to hear back home, it didn't really help, or we just didn't get it at all. So yeah, a lot of this intercultural stuff, you really learn it the hard way, and through trial and error again and again. I made a lot of mistakes before I started to figure things out.*] (Student 1, October 9, 2023)

Most Chinese international students reported they gradually develop a form of strategic flexibility within intercultural environments. When first confronted with the demands of Australian classrooms, such as critical thinking and participatory expression, they often experience confusion and discomfort. However, through a

process of “loss–trial–reflection”, they begin to adjust and adapt. This self-driven adaptation model exemplifies the factor of flexibility within intercultural competence. This observation also raises a broader pedagogical question: is didactic instruction truly effective in enhancing Chinese international students’ intercultural competence? Echoing the argument presented by Tutor 15 (see Chapter 5.3.3), students may not benefit most from being told what to do. Instead, they may require concrete examples and experiential engagement through which core intercultural skills are activated and constructed.

From tutors: necessary pre-class preparation for building flexibility

Most tutors believe that preparing Chinese international students for classroom interactions through necessary pre-class preparation is essential for their flexibility and cultural adaptation. As Tutor 9 pointed out, using role-playing and demonstration videos can help students understand and practise the types of interactions they might encounter in the classroom.

Maybe there could be orientation sessions where students maybe do role plays of what a classroom might look like, or perhaps they see video of some typical kind of classroom activities that might be unfamiliar to them, so that they have a sense before they begin that these are some of the strategies that might be used. So that might be something that might be used. (Tutor 9, December 10, 2023)

The strategy proposed by Tutor 9 helps students rehearse interaction routines, allowing their flexibility to be demonstrated through practice. In this regard, she also offered her own suggestions and expectations concerning the flexibility of Chinese international students:

What I really hope for is that they [Chinese international students] can respond

to my questions by offering unexpected perspectives, thinking that goes beyond the prompt. But what I've noticed is that many of them are aiming to be correct, rather than creative. (Tutor 9, December 10, 2023)

Conversely, interview data show a noticeable difference in how tutors with and without a Chinese cultural background perceive and interpret Chinese international students' flexibility. Unlike Tutor 9, a tutor without a Chinese background, Tutor 15 who possesses Chinese background articulated a sharp perspective in relation to Chinese international students' flexibility:

I don't think their flexibility shows up in things like open discussion or creatively solving problems. It's more like a kind of tactical cleverness; they're good at figuring out what the teacher wants, what the system expects, and then adjusting their approach accordingly. It's tricky and often happens behind the scenes. Maybe they are adapting in their own way, or maybe they're not doing much at all, maybe they're not even aware of it. But for those who do show some kind of flexibility, I wouldn't call them rigid at all. It's just that their way of being flexible ... isn't right. (Tutor 15, March 3, 2025)

In terms of flexibility, there is a main challenge for tutors is how to ensure that flexibility becomes a pathway to real intercultural competence growth rather than a superficial coping mechanism for Chinese international students. Tutors without Chinese background typically expect Chinese international students to learn and demonstrate spontaneous and creative responses during classroom interactions. However, Chinese students often exhibit flexibility in a different form, by striving to identify and provide the "correct answer". In contrast, tutors with a Chinese cultural background point out that what appears to be flexibility is often a form of strategic compliance rather than genuine flexibility. These students are adept at adjusting their

behaviour based on their understanding of tutor expectations. Such behind-the-scenes adaptations are often difficult for tutors without a Chinese cultural background to recognise. Chen (2020), in reviewing Gao's (2003) research on Chinese students' second language motivation, observed that apart from intrinsic interest and language identity, the motivations of Chinese international students in English-medium classrooms are predominantly utilitarian in nature. Yang et al. (2024) further identified that this overwhelming utilitarian tendency not only persists but has intensified, becoming a widespread phenomenon among Chinese international students in recent years. However, what warrants reflexivity on the part of tutors in classroom interactions, and reflection by educational institutions in future policy decisions, is that if utilitarianism has become the prevailing orientation, a critical challenge lies in leveraging this characteristic as a motivational asset to foster the intercultural competence of Chinese international students.

6.4 Summary and concluding marks

This study investigated what challenges Chinese international students face within behavioural factors of intercultural competence and explored how behaviour factors influence their interactions with Australian tutors in classroom contexts.

Overall, the survey findings reveal four key behavioural challenges for Chinese international students in Australian classrooms. First, English language use remains the most difficult issue. Even when students understand tutors' instructions, they often lack confidence to express ideas in local ways, leading to misunderstandings, awkward silences, or overly simple responses that mask their true academic abilities. Second, traditional Confucian values, such as harmony, respect for hierarchy, and conflict avoidance, can clash with Australian classroom norms, limiting reciprocal dialogue and knowledge co-construction. Third, heightened communicative sensitivity, while useful for avoiding overt mistakes, often results in excessive caution, making students reluctant to ask questions or take initiative in

discussions. Finally, limited flexibility hinders their ability to adapt to unfamiliar communicative situations and to engage spontaneously in intercultural interactions.

The qualitative findings revealed the reason behind three major knowledge-related challenges. First, English language use is the most significant challenge faced by Chinese international students in their classroom interactions with Australian tutors. Unlike the discussion of language capacity in Chapter 5, the difficulties identified in this chapter are more evident in mismatches of language register and communicative style. Chinese International students with limited experience in interactive learning environments often adopt written or formal expressions into spoken contexts. This practice makes their classroom discussions unnatural, ambiguous or disconnected. Such problems reduce students' ability to express ideas clearly and confidently, often leading to their hesitation to speak in the class discussion and confusion for their tutors.

Findings indicate that Chinese international students' behavioural norms continue to be guided by high power distance and collectivist thinking of Chinese traditional culture. Their behaviours have often been reflected in uncertainty about when to speak, reluctance to directly challenge tutors, and hesitation caused by concerns about whether their comments can represent the group.

They tend to strive for a balance between group expression and maintaining class harmony. These behavioural patterns create a polite classroom atmosphere, which some tutors appreciate while other tutors have encouraged them to develop individual and independent thinking skills because in the Australian classroom questioning, debating, and active participation are encouraged. Chinese international students' tendencies may be misinterpreted as disengagement or a lack of independence and critical thinking.

In terms of communicative sensitivity, Chinese international students demonstrate strong caution, reflected in an emphasis on politeness and adherence to high-context communication styles. This caution enables them to avoid unintended

offense in classroom discussions. However, excessive self-monitoring leads them to prioritise etiquette over substance, thereby limiting deeper engagement with academic issues. Some Chinese international students have developed the sensitivity to value tutors' feedback, taking constructive guidance for improvement. This heightened sensitivity is a major factor in their development of intercultural competence. At the same time Australian tutors have offered students an important sensitivity: clarifying explicitly that feedback is intended as supportive rather than judgmental, which helps Chinese international students adapt to more direct communication.

In terms of flexibility, findings suggest that Chinese international students are able to adjust their behaviour through a process of "loss–reflection–trial". On the one hand, some students make genuine practical adjustments that align with the expectations of Australian tutors and institutions. On the other hand, other students adopt more strategic responses, aiming to satisfy assessment requirements or tutors' expectations. The latter may be effective in the short term, but they do not necessarily represent authentic intercultural adaptation and are unlikely to lead to sustainable competence.

The behaviour factors within intercultural classroom contexts bring both challenges and opportunities. The challenges of Chinese international students have experienced in language register shifting, behavioural norms, communicative sensitivity, and flexibility reveal the types of support they require for improvement and development. The opportunities for Chinese international students are many. They provide Chinese international students directions to develop their intercultural competence. There are also opportunities for Australian tutors and institutions to refine teaching practices and strategies to support Chinese international students. The classroom "frictions" can be transformed into entry points for supportive interventions, turning students' politeness and cautiousness into intercultural strengths converting challenges into assets and upgrading strategies into sustainable pathways for intercultural competence development of Chinese international students.

More importantly, students need to learn how to express their ideas appropriately and in ways that resemble local patterns of communication, although English language capacity is a prerequisite for intercultural interaction. Without targeted support in language output and discipline-specific expression, Chinese international students may continue to face difficulties in participating effectively in classroom activities.

Chapter 7 Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter of the thesis will conclude the findings and evaluate the extent to which the objectives of the study have been achieved. It will first recapitulate all the findings from Chapter 4 to Chapter 6 by referring back to the research questions proposed at the beginning of the research. Then, it will discuss these findings at the practical level and theoretical level and offer implications for practitioners and researchers. At the practical level, the chapter will discuss how the findings of the thesis respond to the debates around factors which have influenced the development of intercultural competence by Chinese international students and how to improve tutors' teaching practice. At the theoretical level, it will discuss how the findings contribute to the intercultural competence development in higher educations. This chapter will end with the limitations of the thesis and recommendations for future research.

This chapter is arranged as follows: Section 7.2 will recapitulate and discuss key findings related to affective factors in Chapter 4, knowledge factors in Chapter 5, and behavioural factors in Chapter 6 which contribute to or hinder the development of intercultural competence by Chinese international students.

Section 7.3 discusses the theoretical implications and contributions of the study, highlighting how the findings extend existing intercultural competence frameworks in higher education and offer new perspectives on the interplay between affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors of intercultural competence.

Section 7.4 then examines the practical implications, outlining actionable recommendations for various stakeholders, including Chinese international students, Australian tutors, institutions, and policymakers, to foster more effective intercultural engagement in higher education settings.

Section 7.5 discusses the limitations of this research and proposes directions for future studies, aiming to enhance methodological rigour and broaden the scope of inquiry.

7.2 Recapitulation and discussion of findings

The study achieves the two objectives set at the beginning. The first is to assess the intercultural competence of Chinese international students and identify the challenges that arise when they interact with tutors in Australian classrooms. The second is to explore the reasons for these challenges and identify opportunities for Chinese international students to develop intercultural competence. To meet these objectives, this thesis has answered three questions: (1) What are the affective factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why? (2) What are the knowledge factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why? (3) What are the behaviour factors influencing Chinese international students in the development of their intercultural competence? Why? This thesis adapts the Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006) and adopts the mixed-method research design to explore these research questions.

7.2.1 Affective factors

Chapter 4 answered RQ 1, by analysing four key components (attitude, proactiveness, empathy, and affective adaptation), as well as examining students' modes of interaction and learning strategies. While the findings underline significant cultural differences, they also indicate potential opportunities for intercultural transformation.

Quantitative analyses revealed a widespread phenomenon among Chinese international students, characterised as “positive attitude, but low action” in classroom interactions. Despite holding generally positive and open attitudes towards intercultural interactions, students demonstrated notable passivity in actual classroom

participation. In terms of empathy, Chinese international students expressed confidence in their empathic capabilities, displaying respect toward classroom norms and their tutors. However, passive affective adaptation emerged as a major challenge. Overall, Chinese students' affective engagement was not prominent within Australian classrooms. Nonetheless, a novel finding emerged from the analysis indicating a significant positive correlation between students' personality traits and intercultural competence, which was further supported by tutor interviews.

The intercultural competence of Chinese international students has prompted perspectives that extend beyond traditional Western views. This expanded perspective was evident in examining students' attitudes, proactiveness, empathy, and adaptation from both students' and tutors' viewpoints. Curiosity about the new environment, differences in educational systems, and proactive guidance by Australian tutors contributed to students' positive attitudes toward classroom interactions. Past classroom interactive practices, Confucian norms of politeness, habitual passive learning styles, and anxiety over making mistakes were identified as underlying reasons for low proactiveness. Empathy displayed by tutors was found to be essential, as students needed to perceive empathy before achieving meaningful mutual understanding. Although many tutors demonstrated growing awareness of the reason of students' low proactiveness, some remained at the level of sympathy and lacked effective strategies to mitigate students' pressure of adaptation. Regarding affective adaptation, Chinese international students are passive and reluctant, as they often adjusted to new norms out of necessity rather than genuine willingness. Thus, establishing a classroom framework that transitions from a comfort zone to an affective safe zone becomes essential for Chinese international students expressing actively. Tutors need to create inclusive and emotionally secure environments while actively encouraging students' participation.

Furthermore, validating the identified correlation between personality traits and intercultural competence in more diverse contexts is essential. Within classroom

intercultural competence, the affective factor involving Chinese international students is now understood as a challenging scenario dependent on ongoing negotiation between tutors and students. This affective negotiation is fundamental to developing intercultural competence and is closely connected to mutual expectations and understandings within intercultural interactions.

The study argues that attitudes, proactiveness, empathy, and affective adaptation are essential conditions and facilitators for developing intercultural competence in multicultural classrooms. Within Australian multicultural classrooms, Chinese international students' curiosity about new cultures, their respect for cultural differences, and their ability to perceive and appreciate tutors' care and inclusiveness serve as affective strengths. At the same time, these qualities place responsibility on Australian tutors to actively support students' intercultural competence to possess these essential conditions. Their encouragement of courage, independent thinking, critical reflection, and the establishment of an affective safe zone in classrooms helps students confront awkward feelings, resistance to conflict, and the challenges of passive affective adaptation. This support enables students to address deficiencies that might otherwise hinder effective and appropriate classroom interaction.

Chinese students' intercultural competence in classroom interaction reveals a paradox of "positive attitude but low proactiveness". This phenomenon is not only influenced by cultural norms and learning traditions but also reflects adaptive strategies developed under previous institutional constraints. However, some of Chinese international students refused to accept conflicting views and values, which has shown their lack of critical and intercultural thinking skills.

For Chinese international students, entering the Australian classroom is an emotional adventure. Although they often display respect and openness, their low proactiveness reflects a low-risk strategy to avoid potential conflict. This is

consistent with the findings of Wang and Kulich (2015); Chinese international students often exhibit a positive attitude toward the host culture. However, this study does not support the notion of students inherently practising low proactiveness. Interviews with them also confirmed their willingness to take initiatives. They need appropriate encouragement to recognise their own capacities and bravely break away from previous patterns of thinking and engage in dialogue with confidence.

At the pedagogical level, and as many tutors have suggested, the most effective interventions by them involve encouraging courage, independent thinking, dialectical reasoning, and the creation of a low-risk affective safe zone. This is particularly important for Chinese international students, as finding a space where they can express their views without concern and where mistakes are tolerated, an affective safe zone, encourages the sharing of diverse perspectives and fosters trust. This necessitates that educators exercise patience in striking a balance between encouraging students to step out of their comfort zones and creating an affective safe space.

The positive attitudes demonstrated by both teachers and students can provide the foundation for future intercultural negotiation and growth. As illustrated by the Pygmalion and Golem effects (Babad et al., 1982; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), tutors' supportive and auxiliary interventions at this critical initial stage play a pivotal role in the development of students' intercultural competence. On the one hand, positive expectations and constructive feedback can help unlock students' potential; on the other, it is essential to ensure a classroom environment that tolerates mistakes and embraces the expression of cultural differences. From the perspectives of institutional inclusivity and student agency, the task is not simply to categorise students as active/passive or positive/negative. Rather, it is to foster an ongoing process that enacts high expectations and neutralises the adverse effects of low expectations, a process that actively counters the Golem Effect (see Chapter 2.3.1.1

and Chapter 4.3.3). By explicitly dispelling the negative impact of low-expectation labels and gradually guiding students to engage with diverse perspectives, educators can reinforce students' self-confidence through concrete actions.

It is important to note that this study argues that a positive attitude does not indicate that students are fully prepared for intercultural interactions in classrooms. Rather, it reflects a context-dependent willingness to engage. Building greater trust may serve as a way to leverage this positive attitude and transform it into visible participation.

Interestingly, in contrast to Holliday's (2011) findings, this study illustrates a decreasing trend in stereotypes of Chinese international students by Australian educators. Many tutors demonstrate a growing awareness of the reason behind hesitation that Chinese international students often experience in classroom interactions. They increasingly recognise that low proactiveness is often influenced by cultural background, personality traits, language barriers, and prior learning habits, rather than viewing such students as inherently problematic. This shift reflects not only more comprehensive observations of individual student differences but also a heightened level of educator agency in intercultural engagement, and a willingness to interpret and respect student behaviour through a multicultural lens.

However, this thesis found there is a vital gap between understanding and practice. Despite tutors understanding more about Chinese international students, not all tutors possess the strategies or skills necessary to effectively support students in developing intercultural competence in classrooms. This highlights the challenge of a lack of systematic support for tutors at the institutional level. While acknowledging the diversities within student behaviour is important, finding effective ways to help Chinese students actively engage in classroom interactions remains a critical and unresolved issue in educational practice.

Furthermore, this study observes that when discussing proactiveness, low proactiveness is often equated with a lack of preparation or critical thinking. This

perception can lead to the assumption that students have not met the standards of the Australian classroom or the expectations of tutors. However, Xu (2022a) offers a valuable insight: the learning approaches of Chinese international students differ significantly from those of Australian students. For example, quietly taking notes is a deliberate learning strategy rather than a sign of passivity. Chinese international students tend to engage in a more internalised form of learning, which may not always be visible to others. This nuance is often overlooked by Western perspectives that emphasise observable, outward behaviours. In classroom settings, this misunderstanding may lead to the overlooking of students who are well-prepared but accustomed to a quieter, but equally effective, style of participation. Based on this, the present study argues that these challenges should be reframed as opportunities to enhance students' confidence. By drawing on their respect, curiosity, and openness toward new environments, tutors can help students discover their own sense of value and gradually learn to enjoy proactiveness.

Moreover, one of the findings of this study is that personality traits appear to influence the proactiveness of Chinese international students, an observation supported by both the survey data and follow-up tutor interviews. This study extends the findings of Gu and Maley (2008), who argued against stereotypical portrayals of Chinese learners as passive. Personality traits may further moderate the degree of proactiveness among Chinese international students. However, it is important to note that this emerging perspective has not been widely documented in existing literature. Further research involving more diverse samples and in-depth qualitative evidence is necessary to determine whether these findings can be generalised to the broader population of Chinese international students. It is also essential to incorporate structural assessments, such as the Big Five personality test and intercultural competence measures, to provide a more systematic analysis and to allow for a clearer examination of how individuals' personality traits influence intercultural development.

Empathy also helps to dismantle stereotypes, reduces ethnocentrism, and enhances understanding of the cultural other. Many students expressed appreciation for tutors' patience, encouragement, and inclusive classroom practices. It is a valuable resource in intercultural classroom interactions. Consistent with Pettigrew and Tropp (2008), this study highlights the important role of tutors as mediating agents in fostering empathy. Chinese students, through actively observing tutors' understanding and support in response to their interactional challenges, became more aware of the role empathy plays in shaping classroom experiences. They began to perceive the classroom not only as a site of knowledge transmission but also as a space for mutual understanding between students and tutors. In such settings, Chinese students may begin to reframe their perceptions of the classroom environment. They integrate diverse cultural elements of interaction, contributing to the development of a renewed sense of self (Marginson, 2014).

Empathy is also often selective. While it holds potential for intercultural development, it can also turn into protective distancing. Chinese international students, whose educational background often emphasises understanding the intentions or values behind observable behaviours, may approach empathy as a way to evaluate whether tutors genuinely respect them. Conversely, Australian tutors, whose training tends to prioritise observable actions before underlying meanings, may assess Chinese students' integration primarily through their visible willingness to adapt to local academic practices. As a result, both groups may distance themselves when expectations are unmet. Importantly, this study finds that the ideal of cultural empathy is not to eliminate different cultures, but rather to acknowledge and respect them while seeking points of connection (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2006; Deardorff, 2009; Zhu, 2011). This approach enables students to retain their cultural identity while expressing themselves with greater confidence and reducing affective anxiety. Likewise, tutors can adjust their teaching practices through deeper intercultural understanding, supporting students in adapting to new classroom

expectations and fostering meaningful intercultural engagement. Chinese international students are more willing to accept differences in teaching styles than to engage with conflicting worldviews or politically sensitive issues, reflecting a risk-averse orientation. Although conflicting values and perspectives can foster the development of critical thinking and help individuals view the world from different angles, this also requires Australian tutors to remain constantly aware. They need to consider whether perspectives which involve potential value can genuinely stimulate reflection, or whether they may instead create an imbalance in interaction.

Passive affective adaptation is a common experience for Chinese international students in the early stages of classroom interaction. Clear classroom expectations, combined with students' desire for an affective safe space, often lead to irrational compromises. Such compromises are unsustainable and emotionally costly. The internal struggle between external demands for openness and respect, and the internal hesitation driven by unfamiliarity and fear of embarrassment, form the core of affective adaptation. This highlights that tutors play a critical mediating role in supporting Chinese international students' effective affective adaptation. Tutors are expected not only to actively encourage students to step outside their comfort zones but also to create an affective safe zone that balances promoting classroom participation with sensitivity to students' emotional needs. Within such a space, students are more likely to build confidence, express their ideas and emotions openly, and reduce the anxiety often triggered by cultural and linguistic barriers.

It becomes evident that many Chinese international students experience an emotional dilemma characterised by a sense of passivity in adaptation about how to express themselves. During the initial stages of adjustment, students often face internal struggles marked by anxiety stemming from passive acceptance and the pressure to conform. While they do not resist the diversity in Australian classrooms, it does not fully address their interactive challenges within Australian classrooms

It is important to note, however, that both students and tutors widely

acknowledge that affective adaptation is a gradual process, particularly for students accustomed to interaction styles and learning norms common in mainland China. While students' own attitudes are essential to this process, the proactive guidance and emotional support provided by tutors as intercultural agents are equally indispensable. Meaningful progress in adaptation requires mutual understanding and ongoing negotiation between students and tutors, allowing for more targeted and effective support during this transitional period. This process also necessitates that educational institutions assume a proactive and guiding role in facilitating intercultural adjustment.

In addition, in contrast to the findings of Jin and Cortazzi (2011), deep discomfort or resistance to change among Chinese international students in contemporary classroom settings has shown a marked decline in recent years. This positive shift can be attributed to the advancement of technology such as translation tools and AI, and the growing empathy demonstrated by tutors. However, technology is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has indeed helped Chinese international students alleviate the psychological burden associated with language barriers. For instance, social media and AI applications have been shown to provide culturally sensitive emotional and informational support, thereby easing communicative strain and facilitating adjustment in host environments (Zhang et al., 2025). On the other hand, as demonstrated by experiences with virtual classroom environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, online platforms can disrupt the natural flow of face-to-face interaction. Such disruption can further reduce students' willingness and motivation to participate, ultimately undermining the overall effectiveness of classroom engagement (Huang & Zhi, 2023). Chau et al. (2024) think that while the advancement of digital technologies has undoubtedly facilitated more accessible communication, the intercultural understanding derived from virtual platforms often remains superficial. Face-to-face interaction, by contrast, continues to play an irreplaceable role in fostering meaningful intercultural competence.

In conclusion, these findings and discussions have fulfilled the research objective of examining affective factors. They provide insight into Chinese international students' current attitudes, proactiveness, empathy, and affective adaptation in interactive classrooms. They also identify the challenges students face and the opportunities available for further development. Moreover, the issues raised by affective factors offer valuable reference points for how both Chinese international students and Australian tutors can maximise affective support in facilitating intercultural competence.

In addressing these challenges, this study follows the principle of transforming difficulties into opportunities. Tutors can help students confront awkwardness, resistance to conflict, and the challenges of passive affective adaptation by building on their respect for culture, curiosity, and appreciation of tutors' inclusiveness. By creating affective safe zones and assuming responsibility for facilitating intercultural growth, Australian tutors play a vital role in bridging intercultural gaps in classroom interaction.

7.2.2 Knowledge factors

Chapter 5 answers RQ2, which examines the knowledge-related aspects of Chinese international students' classroom interactions in Australia. The knowledge factor focuses on three key components: communication awareness, language capacity, and cultural differences. The findings reveal significant gaps that influence Chinese international students' classroom interactions. Specifically, the results indicate a limited awareness of classroom interactional norms, insufficient English academic vocabulary, ambiguous word choices in communication, restricted listening comprehension, and a lack of appropriate communicative knowledge. These limitations have negative effects on effective participation in discussions and reduce opportunities for engagement with peers and tutors. At the same time, consciously developing an awareness of classroom norms can help students gradually transform

initial feelings of fear into opportunities for learning and growth. Addressing these gaps is therefore essential for strengthening their intercultural competence and for supporting both academic and social integration within the Australian classroom context.

English language capacity remains a significant barrier for Chinese international students. This language barrier not only affects their academic performance but also their confidence and willingness to participate in classroom discussions. Moreover, acquiring more knowledge about differences in classroom norms is crucial prerequisites or bridging factors that enables Chinese international students to achieve effective and appropriate behaviour in intercultural interactions.

The primary challenges faced by tutors, meanwhile, include Chinese international students' lack of awareness of cultural norms in Australian classrooms and their insufficient language capacity. Indeed, inadequate familiarity with Australian classroom norms among Chinese international students often leads to barriers, misunderstandings, and reduced teaching effectiveness. Australian educators may perceive Chinese international students' unfamiliarity with how tutorials are conducted in Australia as a sign that they are not serious enough about their learning. This perception is especially likely if educators are unaware that Chinese international students are accustomed to passively receiving knowledge rather than actively engaging in classroom dialogue.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that there exists a debate among tutors regarding the relationship between Chinese international students' language proficiency and knowledge acquisition. Some tutors believe that forcing Chinese international students to use English may limit the depth of their discussions, and that using their mother tongue might facilitate deeper understanding. Other tutors argue that it is necessary to encourage Chinese international students to use English more in classroom discussions to help them adapt to the English academic environment.

Tutors are also aware of their roles in intercultural communication and strive to adjust their teaching methods. Simultaneously, they attempt to understand the differences in educational backgrounds and teaching methods, aiming to create supportive and inclusive learning environments while also addressing cultural misunderstandings and biases.

The study argues that awareness of classroom communication, understanding of classroom norms, and a strong language capacity are essential pathways to effective classroom participation and, ultimately, academic success.

When Chinese international students enter classrooms that value dialogue, very different from the didactic, exam-oriented classrooms they are used to in China, they often retain a teacher-centred understanding of classroom interaction. This perspective limits their awareness of classroom communication and makes it difficult for them to develop dialogic engagement. As a result, their participation in discussions with Australian tutors is restricted. In this context, tutors' guidance and support become crucial. Such support helps students gradually transform their initial fear of classroom communication into opportunities for growth. A lack of language capacity often leads Chinese students to rely on direct translation from Chinese. This results in inappropriate vocabulary choices, grammatical errors, and weaker listening skills, which in turn create misunderstandings in classroom interaction. With respect to understanding classroom norms, Chinese students often expect tutors to explicitly explain the rules and etiquette of Australian classrooms in the same way they deliver lectures. However, having long been accustomed to didactic instruction, Chinese students benefit far more from concrete and practical examples. Tangible demonstrations serve as the bridge between theory and practice and enable them to gain a deeper understanding of classroom norms.

Regarding knowledge factors, Chinese international students entered Australian classrooms with limited awareness of classroom communication. This is in line with

Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith (2017); the lack awareness of classroom communication is rooted in their prior experience of exam-driven, teacher-centred classrooms in China. Their limited awareness is also easily misinterpreted by tutors as disinterest or lack of understanding. This point reaffirms the discussion that follows: Chinese international students are often unfamiliar with the implicit norms of Australian classrooms.

In addition, aligning with the observations of Zhang (2012), the findings also reveal that Chinese international students have not received systematic support to develop their intercultural knowledge, either in China or in Australia.

While some research has advocated for direct interventions in student training (Wang & Kulich, 2015), such approaches often overlook students' self-awareness within classroom communication. This study demonstrates that previous didactic interventions have had limited impact on facilitating intercultural competence during classroom interactions. In the process of development, absorption and transformation are necessary to form an individual's own knowledge system. Thus, the findings accentuate the importance of structured, targeted, and responsive support mechanisms by tutors and institutions. These interventions should focus on addressing specific weaknesses in students' communicative abilities and support the comprehensive development of their intercultural abilities. This represents a valuable opportunity for educators and institutions to explore innovative pedagogical strategies.

While cultural awareness is thus improving during Chinese international students' academic journey through sustained exposure to classroom interactions, English language capacity remains a key aspect of how Chinese international students adapt to Western educational contexts, regardless of the duration of their learning in Australian classrooms. Prior research in this area has often highlighted tutors' disappointment when linguistic barriers deter student participation (Peng, 2024; Tang & Hu, 2022).

English language capacity remains a common challenge for Chinese international students, consistent with the findings of Xulong (2021) and Wang and Chen (2013). Although Chinese international students are required to meet the minimum English language proficiency standards set by Australian universities before enrolment, there often remains a gap in their ability to meet the implicit requirements for effective classroom interaction, including insufficient English academic vocabulary, ambiguous vocabulary choice in communication, limited English listening comprehension, and a lack of appropriate communicative knowledge. Similar to Zhu and Gao (2012), inappropriate use of vocabulary can directly result in tutors misunderstanding students' intended meanings or lead to communication breakdowns. The reliance on direct translation also reflects a mode of thinking shaped by the Chinese language. Even when students possess sufficient vocabulary, their sentences may not align with English discourse conventions, leading to misunderstandings.

Additionally, Chinese international students mentioned their English language use was influenced by the surrounding environment. This observation aligns closely with Holliday's (2025) recent proposition concerning the influence of "small cultures". In other words, it emphasises the relationship between individuals and their surrounding contexts. The knowledge factor is, to a large extent, influenced by the surrounding environment. Notably, the Chinese international student data reveal a tendency to challenge essentialist perspectives. Unlike earlier studies (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Hofstede, 2001), some Chinese international students' narratives accentuate how individuals are influenced by surrounding social relations their local environments. They construct a kind of new "third space" in which they re-negotiate cultural knowledge and identity, rather than being defined solely by their original cultural groups (McKinley et al., 2019). This reflects the lived nature of intercultural learning, lived in the phenomenological sense (Van Manen, 1997). Learning occurs through direct, first-hand experience, akin to how one

encounters everyday life, rather than through structured, planned, or formally guided instruction.

It is worth noting that there is frequently a disconnect between the safe zones of a third space sought by Chinese international students, typically based on affiliation with co-national peer groups, and the more inclusive, interactive environments envisioned by tutors. Although numerous studies have emphasised the importance of creating a “third space” (McKinley et al., 2019; Mesker & de Jager, 2024), the absence of a thoughtfully articulated and coherent strategic framework that takes into account the cultural characteristics of the interacting parties renders the creation of such a space largely aspirational.

However, in contrast to earlier studies emphasising the significance of teacher-led interventions for students acquiring intercultural knowledge (Wang & Kulich, 2015) and Deardorff’s (2009) assertion that intercultural competence does not emerge automatically. This study found that Chinese international students tend to rely more on self-directed observation than on formal interventions to facilitate their understanding of Australian classrooms and to support their adaptation.

Within classroom contexts, many educators, including educational policymakers, often overlook a particular form of auxiliary support. Although these informal influences are not intentionally instructional, they are critical reference points for Chinese international students in developing intercultural competence. Such influences play a vital role in helping students become familiar with and adapt to new classroom environments. This finding suggests the need to move beyond the prevailing portrayal of Chinese international students as passive learners, and instead to acknowledge their internal motivation and their capacity for independently observing and negotiating classroom norms. Therefore, a structured, informal intervention and training mechanism for students, along with auxiliary support for tutors, should be taken into consideration. Institutions and policymakers ought to assume organizational responsibility for guiding and facilitating these initiatives.

In the early stages of their studies, Chinese international students typically concentrate on examination-oriented knowledge and adopt utilitarian strategies in their learning, rather than consciously seeking to understand the normative practices of classroom discussions. While formal interventions remain one potential approach to enhancing students' knowledge of Australian classrooms, their effectiveness may be limited, and they should not be seen as the only solution.

As Tutor 15 (see Chapter 5.3.3) incisively pointed out, for Chinese international students accustomed to didactic, exam-oriented education, simply being told or taught about the nature of Australian classrooms has limited effectiveness. An exam-oriented approach further exacerbates their neglect of knowledge regarding classroom interaction norms (Liu, 2020). Therefore, tangible examples enable Chinese international students to consciously recognise and internalise classroom norms are essential for their development of intercultural competence.

It cannot be denied that Chinese international students' understanding of the norms of interaction in tutorial sessions is a key factor influencing their interaction with tutors in classrooms. Tutorials typically emphasise active participation in discussions, promoting the critical thinking and problem-solving skills central to Western education. However, these expectations conflict with the learning strategies reported by Chinese students, who possess an educational culture that values respect for the teacher's knowledge and wisdom and discourages direct questioning of the tutors (Tran, 2013; Heng, 2018). Recognising these deeply ingrained cultural norms and fostering mutual understanding in the classroom are essential in cultivating intercultural competence.

Moreover, tutors appear more cognizant of Chinese international students' cultural expectations and learning habits than has been reported in past research (Tomich et al., 2003; Valiente, 2008). Although tutors may still have limited knowledge of Chinese classroom norms, the increasing number of Chinese international students studying in Australia has prompted enhanced efforts to

understand and accommodate these students' approaches to learning. This shift aligns with broader technological developments and an evolving notion of what constitutes "successful" classroom interactions, including a less exclusive emphasis on oral participation. Acknowledging these shifts is integral to cultivating an environment that values intercultural understanding and mutual adaptation.

Interestingly, in this study, tutors' debates regarding language provide a new perspective for the relative importance of Chinese international students' English language capacity versus their subject knowledge in the classroom. In contrast to the widespread monolingualism described by Hajek and Slaughter (2015), the phenomenon of monolingualism in the Australian education system appears to have gradually diminished. Tutors increasingly recognise the linguistic challenges faced by second-language learners, contributing to a more inclusive learning environment for students who speak English as second language. Many tutors approached the issue from a translanguaging perspective, considering how students negotiate the relationship between in-depth subject knowledge exploration and language capacity. Specifically, some tutors who favoured English as the primary medium of instruction reported experiencing anxiety or discomfort when students with lower English language capacity engaged in the use of Mandarin during classroom interactions. While maintaining English as the primary medium of instruction certainly supports the development of language proficiency, an overly rigid emphasis on monolingual teaching environments can hinder some students' engagement in the co-construction of knowledge. In fact, translanguaging in the classroom can enrich instructional interactions and enable tutors to more accurately capture students' authentic cognitive processes and academic needs (Dobinson et al., 2024).

In turn, an exclusive emphasis on translanguaging in the classroom is also inadvisable; it is important to strike a balance between knowledge acquisition and interactive engagement. As Ticheloven et al. (2021) emphasises, an overemphasis on translanguaging in international classrooms can give rise to various classroom crises,

such as confusion and a lack of clear objectives. Hence, within international higher education contexts, institutions should, on one hand, avoid simplistically equating internationalization with promoting English as the sole medium of communication. Instead, they should recognise linguistic diversity and multilingual practices as integral components of an internationalised educational environment (Hadley, 2015). On the other hand, universities should be cautious about exclusively privileging translanguaging at the expense of established language norms and instructional clarity.

Obviously, interviews with both Chinese international students and Australian tutors reveal that a major challenge lies in the absence of a coherent institutional framework to guide intercultural knowledge development. While tutors are generally aware of the need to support Chinese international students, there is a lack of comprehensive classroom strategies and systematic design for fostering intercultural competence. As a result, both Chinese international students and tutors tend to rely heavily on experiential approaches, which are often fragmented and insufficient.

In essence, the development of intercultural competence in this context continues to rely primarily on ongoing trial and error between students and tutors.

Similar to an interesting finding for the affective factor, personality is an unexpected significant finding in this study, demonstrating a positive predictive effect on the development of Chinese international students' intercultural competence. However, it is worth noting that current research on the relationship between personality and the development of intercultural competence remains limited, with a lack of well-defined mechanisms and a coherent theoretical foundation. Existing studies (Yeke & Semerciöz, 2016; Azadipour, 2019) are primarily exploratory and situated within specific intercultural contexts. This study argues that it is important to integrate personality, as a key internal mechanism, into the internal aspects of Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence in future theoretical frameworks. Personality traits may influence development of intercultural

competence at each factor. Future research should therefore further investigate how personality specifically influences each stage of intercultural competence development and advances this field at both theoretical and empirical levels.

In summary, these findings and discussions address the research objective of examining knowledge factors among Chinese international students. They provide insights into students' communication awareness, English language capacity, and their understanding of cultural differences in classroom practice. At the same time, they identify gaps in knowledge, mismatches between theory and practice, and the need for tailored support based on students' learning characteristics. The recommendations regarding knowledge factors also highlight key areas for future development among Chinese international students and provide Australian tutors with clear guidance on how to facilitate students' ability to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. While improved cultural awareness among Chinese international students is the key for engagement in classrooms, language remains a critical medium through which intercultural competence is developed. Although cultural differences continue to shape classroom experiences, current evidence points to a significant evolution in both student and tutor practices compared to earlier research.

Furthermore, educational policymakers need to facilitate meaningful dialogues between students and tutors to foster mutual understanding and explore the possibility of constructing a shared "third space" (Holliday, 2022). This third space provides Chinese students and Australian tutors with opportunities to reflect on each other's perspectives. It allows them to have the knowledge to transcend cultural labels and stereotypes and to engage in an ongoing process of negotiation amidst uncertainty.

7.2.3 Behaviour factors

Chapter 6 answered RQ3, which examines the behavioural factors which have influenced Chinese international students' classroom interactions in Australia. It is evident that the lack of language use ability constitutes a core barrier to Chinese

international students' classroom interaction. Although these Chinese international students have invested considerable effort in accumulating linguistic knowledge, the absence of opportunities to practise in authentic communicative settings limits their ability to develop flexible and effective English language skills. This deficiency is reflected not only in the overly formal expressions but also in a gradual erosion of students' confidence in interaction. As a result, they often fall into a negative feedback loop that significantly undermines both the naturalness and enthusiasm of their classroom engagement.

At the same time, culturally ingrained behavioural norms and sensitivities, influenced by traditional Chinese values, play a dual role in classroom interaction. On the one hand, high power distance and collectivist orientations of Chinese culture led Chinese international students to act cautiously, avoiding direct confrontation or overt self-presentation, which they hope to maintain surface-level classroom harmony. On the other hand, this cautiousness often becomes excessive, manifesting in heightened sensitivity toward face, etiquette, and linguistic appropriateness. This over-sensitivity hinders substantive classroom interaction and critical thinking, making engagement with tutors more difficult. While these cultural traits reflect virtues of respect and politeness, they frequently function as hidden barriers to authentic participation in intercultural learning environments and thus warrant greater attention and guidance from educators and institutions.

It is important to emphasise that Chinese international students' flexible coping strategies in classroom interactions do not merely reflect passive adaptation but rather demonstrate a high degree of agentic engagement. Although such strategies often emerge through experiences of failure and emotional tension, they highlight students' capacity for self-reflection and adjustment. To further foster this adaptive process, it is crucial to create a third space within the classroom, a safe zone where students can freely express themselves, and linguistic or behavioural differences cease to constitute a classroom issue. Moving forward, beyond providing support in language and

cultural adaptation, institutions and tutors should also pay closer attention to individual personality differences. Through targeted mentoring and strategic guidance, students' intercultural setbacks can be transformed into valuable learning resources, thereby enhancing their behavioural factor of intercultural competence and improving their overall performance in intercultural classroom interactions.

Lastly, the additional findings that both language proficiency and personality traits exert significant positive predictors of intercultural competence further direct future research towards the exploration of individual differences. Traditionally, studies on intercultural competence have primarily focused on group characteristics and general patterns, with limited attention paid to how individual differences influence intercultural competence and interaction outcomes in classroom contexts. However, the findings suggest that intercultural competence is not merely a measure of one's ability to engage with different cultural groups. It is also closely linked to individuals' affective, knowledge-based, and behavioural dispositions within intercultural settings. Personality traits, in particular, may shape one's sensitivity to cultural differences and flexibility in adjusting behaviours accordingly. Therefore, it is recommended that future research on intercultural competence shift from group-based attributions to a multidimensional investigation of individual differences. This should employ both quantitative and qualitative approaches to reveal the mechanisms by which language proficiency, personality, and other variables operate across diverse cultural and educational contexts. Such an approach not only enriches theoretical understanding of intercultural competence but also offers more targeted intervention and support strategies for universities and educators. These strategies can be applied in practice and evaluated through measurable outcomes, facilitating the effective intercultural competence development of Chinese international students.

In Australian classrooms, limited classroom interactive experience in China often creates challenges for Chinese international students. They face mismatches

between language genres and interactional styles, particularly when written and spoken registers are mixed in classroom discussions. This reduces the clarity and confidence of their expression. Australian tutors often encourage students to adopt more individualistic and independent learning habits. This encouragement helps Chinese international students overcome challenges rooted in high power-distance and collectivist behavioural norms. Such challenges include hesitation to interrupt the class, a reluctance to question the teacher, and concern about whether their answers represent the collective. Furthermore, students can be sensitive to critical feedback from Australian tutors. They may also experience discomfort with differences in forms of address during classroom interactions. Although Australian tutors appreciate the students' consistent respectfulness, such deference can inadvertently limit classroom interaction. Tutors must therefore strike a balance between preserving respect and encouraging active participation. The strategic flexibility of Chinese international students is an advantage. They are adept at identifying tutor expectations through systematic or modular approaches. It is important to reiterate that Australian tutors play a key auxiliary role in helping and supporting these students to bridge their challenges. How to guide students in using tutors' expectations strategically is a point worthy of reflection.

Within the behavioural factor, English language use remains one of the main challenges faced by Chinese international students during classroom interactions. The output of this behaviour is not simply a lack of English language capacity. Consistent with Jiang et al. (2017), many Chinese international students in this study also tend to adopt an overly formal or written register, which does not align well with the context of everyday classroom discussions and often disrupts the coherence and flow of interaction. Tutors distinguished between spoken and written communication, encouraging students to adopt a more natural and direct style during oral interactions. This teaching strategy aims to reduce students' fear of making mistakes and helps them develop fluency in real-time communication.

However, for many Chinese international students, this encouragement can itself be a new challenge. It may unintentionally increase pressure and lead them into another cycle of emotional risk-taking. For some students, the pressure can be so intense that they withdraw entirely, reinforcing a cycle of silence and disengagement. This study argues for the creation of a validation zone alongside the affective safe space. This zone serves as a flexible environment where students can experiment with new expressive behaviours while gradually breaking free from the cycle of silence.

In contrast to the findings of Filipi and Chuang (2023), although most Chinese international students devote substantial effort to learning English both prior to arriving in Australia, they generally lack opportunities to engage in real-life interactions and language practice within authentic Australian classroom settings. In line with Zhai and Razali (2022) and God and Zhang (2019), insufficient language use skills and a lack of practice and feedback constitute major challenges on the development of students' language application abilities. These limitations, compounded by long-standing behavioural norms of restraint and formality influenced by prior educational experiences, echo the previously discussed issue of positive attitudes but low proactivity again, an issue closely linked to both behavioural and affective factors. This interplay clearly demonstrates how affective factors can directly influence students' behavioural engagement. Conversely, limited behavioural participation may reinforce affective barriers, creating a cyclical relationship of mutual response and impact between the two factors.

At present, the relationship between language and intercultural competence in the higher education still needs further exploration (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). As Byram (2021), Fantini et al. (2020) and Félix-Brasdefer (2025) argue, existing frameworks of intercultural competence have placed limited focus on the role of language. Given that current models rarely incorporate language as a core component, it remains an open question whether language competence should be

conceptualised as a distinct new factor or as a cross-cutting enabler operating within each existing factor. Moreover, embedding language into intercultural competence frameworks is not merely a matter of adding another component or internal mechanism. Rather, it calls for a rethinking of the assumptions behind how intercultural learning takes place, particularly within multilingual, multicultural, and institutional contexts.

The findings of this study largely support Holmes' (2006) assertion that, when confronted with language-related challenges, Chinese international students tend to resolve communicative tension through compromise and concession. In classroom settings, this often manifests as passive listening and silence, adopted as a strategy to avoid the risk of inappropriate language use or cultural misunderstandings. However, this study extends beyond Holmes' view by arguing that, in multicultural classrooms, the language use challenges can be opportunities to facilitate intercultural competence. The ways in which students respond to these challenges often reflect differences in values and interactional styles. While misunderstandings are inevitable in intercultural interactions, this study suggests that these challenges also create spaces for growth and negotiation. These instances of misunderstanding create conditions and provide opportunities to deepen mutual understanding. Recognising and addressing language-related challenges is essential for developing both effective and appropriate language output and meaningful interactional outcomes in classrooms.

Chinese international students' collectivist behavioural patterns and high-power distance lead them to approach classroom engagement with heightened caution. Deeply influenced by traditional Chinese cultural values, this collectivist orientation often manifests as a reluctance to question authority publicly, along with heightened respect, deference, and self-restraint in the presence of academic figures. This behavioural pattern aligns with Spitzberg and Changnon's (2009) findings that collectivist cultures prioritise group harmony over individual expression.

However, this tendency to maintain harmony means that students may carefully evaluate whether their questions or viewpoints fit collective norms before speaking.

Although collectivist tendencies can improve classroom discipline and appear to promote harmony and order on the surface, they may also limit the development of intercultural competence necessary for effective classroom engagement. In contrast to the findings of Chan and Lam (2023), this superficial harmony may hinder rather than facilitate substantive academic progress. When both students and tutors become overly concerned with maintaining interpersonal harmony and avoiding discomfort, classroom interactions risk becoming overly cautious and emotionally managed, detracting from open intellectual exploration and critical dialogue. This overemphasis on collective sentiment can impose constraints on both parties, ultimately inhibiting the exchange of authentic perspectives and limiting students' potential for academic growth and intellectual independence.

Differences in behavioural norms challenge frameworks of intercultural competence development in some ways, including that engagement progresses in a linear cycle and a predictable way. In reality, diverse behavioural norms across cultures sometimes disrupt this cycle of development. Certain behaviours may represent equally effective forms of participation, even if they appear different on the surface. Therefore, addressing this issue requires moving away from individualistic and low-power-distance standards as the default benchmark. Instead, tutors should guide students using a shared set of classroom values and goals. This approach can help students understand which behaviours are most beneficial and which can be accepted within the learning environment. Hence, supporting Chinese international students in achieving effective and appropriate behavioural output in the classroom requires more than simply acknowledging existing cultural barriers. It is also essential to address the potential impacts of students' harmonious behaviours, which may inadvertently hinder active participation and engagement.

Sensitivity to cultural differences is a cultural asset embedded in the Confucian tradition of respect and reverence; however, when placed within intercultural classroom interactions, it may also become a potential communication barrier. Overly sensitive and excessively polite communicative styles do not necessarily contribute to intercultural appropriateness. On one hand, Chinese international students often engage in self-monitoring to avoid potential misunderstandings or inappropriate verbal conduct. While cautiousness may be appropriate in interactions, it can escalate into hyper-sensitivity in actual classroom settings, thereby significantly suppressing their willingness and capacity to participate authentically. Consistent with Wang's (2013) research on Chinese students' classroom experiences, Chinese international students often demonstrate heightened sensitivity in their interactions with Australian tutors, deeply influenced by Confucian ideals of etiquette and hierarchical social order. While this cautiousness reflects a virtue of profound respect for others, excessive sensitivity may surpass communicative equilibrium, thus impeding genuine dialogue and effective student–teacher interaction.

For Australian tutors, Chinese international students often adhere strictly to honorifics in addressing their tutors during classroom exchanges, a practice that can appear overly formal and reserved. This may leave tutors uncertain about how to adjust their own communicative stance—whether to lower their formality or initiate a more egalitarian and open dialogue. This observation echoes the findings of Wang and Nam (2025), who identified the normalization of heightened sensitivity to honorifics in intercultural classroom contexts. Although such caution reflects cultural respect, it can also undermine spontaneity and communicative flexibility, ultimately diminishing the efficiency and natural flow of classroom discourse. This phenomenon aligns closely with Xia's (2017) findings on intercultural sensitivity, which suggest that Chinese international students are highly attentive to issues of respect and “face” in intercultural contexts. Due to a lack of confidence, they often overemphasise the

accuracy and appropriateness of their expressions, which ultimately diminishes the enthusiasm and effectiveness of their classroom interactions.

Flexible coping strategies among Chinese international students are not only influenced by culturally embedded emotional restraint but also reflect intercultural learning opportunities that emerge through “behavioural collisions” and strategic negotiation. From the initial stages of emotional stress and adaptation anxiety to subsequent shifts in behaviour, many students develop a form of “defensive adaptation”, adjusting passively to the interactive norms of foreign classrooms. However, the emergence of such strategic adaptations warrants further critical reflection. It diverges considerably from the intercultural competence development model proposed by Deardorff (2006), which emphasises deliberate training and structured guidance as the foundation for intercultural competence acquisition. In contrast, many Chinese students interviewed in this study noted that their intercultural competence evolved incrementally through repeated setbacks in real-world interactions, what might be described as “learning through hitting walls”. This experiential trajectory accentuates the significance of personal engagement and reflection in the intercultural learning process. For Chinese international students, then, intercultural competence development appears to be less about external instruction and more about an internally driven, reflective, and experience-based process. In this regard, the role of mentors becomes critical, not only in offering guidance but in helping students transform moments of failure into valuable learning opportunities.

These findings are consistent with the work of Chen and Curdt-Christiansen (2024). They argue that students frequently draw on prior experiences to achieve academic goals through continuous negotiation, bargaining, and self-reflection within classroom settings. This process of strategic adaptation involves not only deciphering and exploring classroom interaction norms but also maintaining emotional security and affirming academic identity.

Although such behaviour may appear passive, marked by surface-level compliance with new interactional norms, it in fact demonstrates an attuned flexibility. Chinese international students actively monitor their own performance, attend to environmental cues, and respond to mentor feedback, constantly recalibrating their communicative strategies to achieve more effective self-expression and academic integration within intercultural environments.

Thus, what may be perceived as “passivity” in intercultural adaptation is, in essence, an expression of highly strategic agency. This adaptive flexibility represents a key competency for Chinese international students engaging in intercultural contexts, and it provides a critical entry point for institutions and educators seeking to support them.

Finally, in a similar vein, tutors and educational institutions should pay close attention to the strategic flexibility demonstrated by Chinese international students. The flexibility behind their intercultural competence is often utilitarian in nature, potentially diverting from the primary objectives of classroom interaction, which are deep discussion and the cultivation of creative and critical thinking skills. Notably, this phenomenon not only persists but has become increasingly prevalent in recent years (Yang et al., 2024). In light of this reality, simply criticising or disregarding such utilitarian manifestations of intercultural flexibility is unlikely to enhance Chinese international students’ intercultural competence. Instead, the key challenge lies in reflecting on how this characteristic can be transformed into an opportunity and leveraged to support the development of their intercultural competence.

In addition, it is worth noting that personality traits have also been found to play a positive role in facilitating behaviour outputs and enhancing the classroom interaction effectiveness and academic achievement of Chinese international students. This is consistent with the observations of Cao and Meng (2020). In particular, personality traits associated with openness and extroversion can enhance

students' confidence in interactions and effectively support the development of intercultural competence. This suggests that, in the future, educational practices should consider individual differences in personality, since personality traits not only affect Chinese international student' behavioural outputs in multicultural classroom context but also influence the development of intercultural competence. By integrating personality-aware approaches into intercultural training and support systems, educational institutions may foster more meaningful and sustained classroom engagement among Chinese international students.

These findings and discussions address the research objective of examining behavioural factors among Chinese international students. They provide new insights into their English language use, behavioural norms, communicative sensitivity, and flexibility. They also highlight the challenges Chinese international students face, including language use, adherence to previous behavioural norms, and misunderstandings of critical feedback. At the same time, the findings reveal the diversity of students' flexible strategies. The recommendations regarding behavioural factors highlight areas of future development for Chinese international students. They also provide clear guidance for Australian tutors on how to facilitate students' behavioural outputs and outcomes, and how to support new cycles of reflection and practice.

7.3 Theoretical implications

At the theoretical level, this study offers important contributions to the refinement and expansion of the intercultural competence framework.

First, by systematically adopting an established intercultural competence model, this research validates the applicability and depth of existing theories in real-world higher educational contexts. Specifically, it investigates Chinese international students' intercultural competence in Australian classrooms through the three widely recognised factors: affective, knowledge, and behavioural. This conceptual

framework captures the progression from students' attitudes and knowledge acquisition to their ability to enact appropriate and culturally responsive behaviour in classroom interactions with tutors. In this regard, the definition proposed by Antal and Friedman (2008), that is, intercultural competence as "the ability to consciously explore one's ways of thinking and acting so as to actively construct an appropriate strategy" (p. 365), is especially relevant. Their concepts align well with the multifaceted experiences of Chinese international students during intercultural classroom interactions. They offer valuable explanatory power for understanding how intercultural competence is developed and enacted in real-world educational settings, particularly for students in a multicultural learning environment.

Regarding the Affective factor, this study enriches the theoretical framework by reconceptualising "Attitude" to explicitly include "Proactiveness" and "Affective Adaptation" as critical sub-components. While Deardorff's (2006) model posits attitude (respect, openness, curiosity) as the fundamental starting point, this study reveals that for Chinese international students, a "positive attitude" alone is insufficient to engage interaction. Proactiveness motivates individuals to actively seek opportunities for cross-cultural engagement, while empathy enables them to understand and resonate with the emotions of people from different cultural backgrounds. Affective adaptation, in turn, allows individuals to regulate their own emotional responses when encountering cultural conflicts or shocks, thereby maintaining healthy affective functioning. In terms of the relational mechanism, as illustrated in the conceptual framework, these affective elements do not exist in isolation; rather, they serve as the engine that "catalyses perception" of the subsequent Knowledge factor. Specifically, a student's empathy and psychological resilience (affective adaptation) determine their willingness to perceive and absorb new cultural cues and linguistic knowledge. Without this affective catalysis, the transition from mere presence to cognitive engagement is blocked

Within the Knowledge factor, this study modifies the existing model by structurally embedding "English Language Capacity" alongside cultural awareness, arguing that language is the cognitive foundation of intercultural knowledge in higher education. Existing models often overlooked language proficiency as a core skill or assume it is subsumed under general cultural background. However, the findings indicate that for Chinese international students, "English language capacity", including specific academic vocabulary and listening comprehension, is the primary vessel for accessing cultural understanding. This study thus extends the Knowledge factor to be a dual construct of cultural know-how and linguistic capability. In the relational flow of the framework, this accumulated Knowledge acts as the essential infrastructure that "supports and guides" the Behavioural factor. It bridges the gap between wanting to interact (Affective) and knowing how to interact (Behavioural), transforming abstract empathy into concrete, context-appropriate strategies.

The Behavioural factor is expanded to distinguish "English Language Use" from capacity, while simultaneously highlighting the "feedback loop" mechanism that speaks back to the cyclical nature of the framework. The findings illuminates the relationships depicted in the framework's feedback loops ("Response" and "Impact"). The outcomes of behavioural interactions, whether a successful exchange or a communicative breakdown, do not merely end the process; they generate a "Response" that feeds back into the Affective factor. A positive behavioural outcome reinforces confidence and proactiveness, whereas a negative experience (e.g., language failure) can degrade the initial positive attitude, potentially creating a cycle of withdrawal. Thus, the framework is modified to depict intercultural competence not as a static destination, but as a continuous, self-regulating cycle driven by the impact of behavioural outputs on the student's affective state.

Second, this study focuses on scholars' attention to language within intercultural competence models. Byram (2021) and Félix-Brasdefer (2025) emphasised the importance of language proficiency, its role in shaping cognition, and its influence on

intercultural interaction. The operationalisation of “language capacity” in the knowledge factor and “language use” in the behavioural factor remains limited in higher education. This is particularly true within tutor–student classroom interactions. To emphasize this, this study explicitly incorporates language into both the knowledge and behavioural factors of its analytical framework. This integration allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese international students’ intercultural competence and provides valuable insights for educational stakeholders.

Finally, quantitative findings indicate that personality traits positively predict intercultural competence outcomes. This accentuates the need to incorporate personality more explicitly into theoretical models, particularly in classroom contexts. Such findings also align with tutors’ observations of Chinese international students’ intercultural competence in classrooms. Although prior research has examined the predictive power of personality in relation to academic achievement (Shaninah & Mohd, 2024), teacher–student relationships (Mammadov & Avci, 2024), and study-abroad experiences (Chedru & Ostapchuk, 2023), its integration into intercultural competence frameworks remains limited. Through regression analysis, this study demonstrates the significant role of personality in shaping intercultural performance, thereby strengthening the theoretical rationale for recognising individual personality differences as essential factors in the development of intercultural competence.

Table 7.1: Contributions to the development of intercultural competence

| | Interpretations from intercultural competence factors as reviewed in Chapter 2 | How this study expands on and adds to the interpretations by applying the intercultural competence to the classroom context in Australian higher education |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Affective factor | The affective factor represents the foundational and preparatory aspect of intercultural competence; it includes openness, respectful, and curious attitudes. It also | In the Australian classroom context, affective factors for Chinese international students need to possess an openness, respectful and curious attitudes, willingness to understand |

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| | encompasses the willingness to engage proactively to new cultural environments, the ability to understand and empathise with others, and the ability for emotional adaptation. | and appreciate cultural differences; actively demonstrating empathy and emotional management, and positively adapting an individual's emotions to the expectations of local classroom interaction. |
| Knowledge factor | The knowledge factor refers to the cognitive and cultural know-how basis of intercultural competence. It involves awareness of both individual's own culture and other cultures, deeper cultural knowledge, and linguistic capacity. These cognitive resources provide the guides for interpreting and outputting behaviour. | In the Australian classroom context, knowledge factors constitute the cognitive and cultural know-how that underpins the development of Chinese international students' intercultural competence. They need to be aware of both their own cultural aspects and those of others, possess a deeper understanding of why classroom norms may differ, and accurately appraise their own English language capacity. This stage provides students with the necessary critical knowledge to interpret classmates' and tutors' interactive choices, evaluate interactional cues, and thereby select appropriate interactional strategies before conducting classroom interactions. |
| Behavioural factor | The behavioural factor denotes the observable outputs of interaction, which constitute the outcome of the affective and knowledge factors. It involves engaging in contextually appropriate and effective actions and communication. It includes the use of language, adherence to behaviour norms, sensitivity in interaction, and the ability to adjust flexibly. | In the Australian classroom, behaviour factors require students to transform their cultural knowledge and linguistic capacity into observable, context-appropriate actions: using dialogic language, following local participation and behaviour norms, showing interactional sensitivity, and flexibly adjusting behaviour during classroom interactions to facilitate effective communication and collaboration. |

Overall, this study conceptualises the development of intercultural competence as the process to integrate and actively leverage both one's heritage culture and the target culture across affective, knowledge, and behavioural domains when engaging in intercultural interaction scenarios. It involves interacting with members of other cultures by recognising and responding to each party's experiences and expectations, thereby facilitating communication that is appropriate, effective, and mutually satisfactory. Ultimately, intercultural competence encompasses the capacity to establish, maintain, and strengthen harmonious relationships and long-term cooperation.

It is important to emphasise that the affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors of intercultural competence are mutually supportive and reinforce one another. The development of intercultural competence can be understood as a cyclical process. Furthermore, the intercultural scenario provides a mediating context that enables the development and enactment of intercultural competence. Learners first rely on affective factors to engage with intercultural encounters on an emotional level. This initial engagement provides the foundation for rationality, which involves systematic knowledge acquisition and reflective understanding of cultural differences through the tool of the English language. Ultimately, this rationality can inform practical application, transforming knowledge into appropriate behavioural strategies. The intercultural scenario of classrooms thus acts as a mediating context in which this progression unfolds, enabling individuals to integrate affective, cognitive, and behavioural resources into coherent and adaptive intercultural performance.

7.4 Practical implications

At the practical level, the findings of this study offer valuable implications for stakeholders, including Chinese international students, Australian tutors, researchers, and international education institutions.

Firstly, the study helps Chinese international students become more aware of their intercultural challenges in classroom interactions with tutors in Australian higher education settings. Simultaneously, it raises awareness among Australian tutors of their important auxiliary role in facilitating intercultural competence in classrooms for students. By presenting the concerns and challenges from both the students' and tutors' perspectives, the study emphasises the importance of demonstrating appropriate intercultural competence through behaviour, ultimately contributing to more successful and meaningful classroom interactions.

Secondly, the study highlights that the level of classroom participation among Chinese international students should not be interpreted as a reflection of their academic abilities, but rather as a result of their intercultural competence. In many Asian educational contexts, classroom behaviour is influenced by norms that emphasise respect for authority, cautious speech, and attentiveness. Students are often accustomed to remaining quiet, listening carefully, and taking notes rather than speaking up or asking questions. In Western classrooms, this can be misperceived as a lack of engagement. With this understanding, tutors may recognise that Chinese international students are not necessarily disinterested or underperforming, but that their participation styles are shaped by cultural norms. Tutors can adopt more culturally responsive teaching strategies, such as creating an affective safe zone for participation, or providing discussion topics in advance, to gradually encourage more active classroom involvement. These strategies not only support students' academic development but also promote intercultural understanding and exchange.

Finally, for educational policymakers, the study accentuates the need to develop a structured and targeted support program in response to the growing proportion of Chinese international students in Australia. Recognising these cultural and educational differences allows policymakers to implement more effective measures to support Chinese international students' integration into the Australian education system. Beyond language support programs, initiatives such as cultural exchange

activities, the appointment of cultural coordinators, and pedagogical adjustments can help bridge gaps in intercultural competence. These support systems not only enhance students' academic performance and classroom participation but also improve their overall satisfaction with the learning experience. Such comprehensive support contributes to Chinese international students' successful adaptation, enables them to realise their full potential, ensures the equitable distribution of educational resources, and promotes diversity and inclusion. It also enhances the international reputation of Australian educational institutions, ultimately attracting more international students in the long term.

To address the challenges identified in this study, the following strategies are recommended:

For Chinese international students, it is essential to build upon their existing positive attitudes toward learning by further enhancing their awareness and skills related to active classroom participation. Students should proactively familiarise themselves with the specific features of Australian classroom culture, cultivate an open and proactive mindset toward cultural adaptation, and develop greater confidence and flexibility in language use. At the same time, they should aim to reduce excessive sensitivity and restraint during interactions. It is also important for students to move beyond superficial flexibility and instead focus on developing deep, internal capacities in both linguistic and cultural awareness. Future institutionally structured programs should aim at enhancing intercultural competence, be guided by these insights and principles, and be informed by an integrated understanding of individual personality traits and language capacity strategies.

For Australian tutors, it is crucial to leverage their strong sense of empathy by identifying students' interactional challenges and emotional needs with sensitivity and precision, and by providing targeted classroom guidance and constructive feedback. Recognising the low proactiveness, affective passivity, and heightened sensitivity often exhibited by Chinese students, tutors should work to create an

affectively safe and clearly structured interactive environment. This includes explicitly articulating expectations for classroom interaction and supporting students in gradually overcoming cultural and psychological barriers.

Similarly, once structured guidelines for enhancing the intercultural competence of Chinese international students are established, the active involvement of tutors becomes equally important. Tutors are not only key facilitators in intercultural learning but also play a vital role in recognising individual personality differences and responding appropriately to cultural challenges in the classroom. Without their engagement and coordination, even the most carefully designed guidelines risk becoming disconnected from students' actual learning experiences and may ultimately fail to achieve their intended outcomes.

For educational institutions and policymakers, there is an indispensable responsibility to support both the intercultural development of Chinese international students and the supportive role of tutors. Institutions should establish structured and systematic support mechanisms and training programs. These may include workshops specifically designed to assist Chinese students with cultural and linguistic adaptation, aimed at strengthening their intercultural communication awareness and English language proficiency. At the same time, tutors should receive professional development and resource support in intercultural pedagogy to help them better understand and respond to the challenges faced by Chinese and other international students. This support can also alleviate the sense of helplessness that may arise when tutors are willing to help but are unsure how to do so.

In terms of systematic recommendations, institutions should first implement language support and cultural adaptation workshops that introduce commonly used Australian expressions, informal classroom interaction norms, communication styles, and cultural differences. Second, training on intercultural communication and inclusive teaching practices should be incorporated into tutor induction programs. This would equip tutors with the necessary skills to support the

intercultural competence development of Chinese and other international students, enabling the creation of a psychologically and communicatively safe “third space”. Third, institutions should establish accessible feedback channels for students to express concerns and receive constructive feedback, which can help identify ongoing issues and guide adjustments in intercultural strategies. Fourth, universities should consider appointing neutral cultural coordinators either as part of a dedicated department for managing intercultural challenges or as embedded facilitators in classrooms where intercultural tensions are more likely to arise. These coordinators could play a proactive role in mediating cultural misunderstandings, facilitating dialogue, and guiding both students and staff toward more culturally responsive practices, thereby reinforcing institutional support for the development of students’ intercultural competence. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the potential fragility of cultural coordinators, particularly when constrained by institutional authority, undermined by cultural hierarchies, or challenged by differing expectations among stakeholders. As van Meerkerk (2025) noted in an empirical study on school cultural coordinators, these positions often rely heavily on personal networks and may be constrained by the pressures of routine academic tasks. Moreover, institutions must guard against bureaucratisation; cultural coordination should not be reduced to a symbolic function aligned with policy trends but rather should serve the core interests of both students and tutors.

By implementing these strategies, educational institutions can more effectively support Chinese international students, while tutors benefit from engaging with cultural diversity. Ultimately, this not only enhances the intercultural competence of Chinese international students but also fosters a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all, contributing to the institution’s reputation and long-term success.

7.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research

7.5.1 Limitations

Intercultural competence is a multifaceted construct that emphasises the interrelation of affective, knowledge, and behavioural factors. In addition, language proficiency and personality traits are equally important components. Accurately assessing the intercultural competence of Chinese international students is a challenging task. Although this study has provided valuable insights into the intercultural competence of Chinese international students and the expectations and challenges perceived by Australian tutors, it has four notable limitations.

First, the selection of student participants presents a limitation. All participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from within the university campus and tended to be those who were more engaged, willing, and interested in participating in the research. As a result, the sample likely reflects the views of relatively proactive and helpful Chinese international students, whose feedback may be more positive. The experiences and perspectives of students with lower levels of engagement, who may face greater difficulties, might not have been captured. From the perspective of affective factors, the level of initiative and positive attitude demonstrated by the participants may be slightly higher than that of non-participants. While the findings drawn from this group cannot be generalised to the entire population of Chinese international students, they nevertheless offer valuable experiences that can inform future initiatives and research projects.

Second, the study could not consider all aspects of individual variation among Chinese international students, such as family background, prior educational experiences, and regional differences within China. These contextual factors may have influence on the study's results. Therefore, future research should aim to increase the diversity of the sample by including individuals from a broader range of regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational histories. Doing so would help produce more comprehensive and representative findings and allow researchers to better understand how objective factors shape intercultural competence. Additionally,

research methods should be adjusted accordingly to accommodate such diversity and to ensure greater accuracy in data analysis.

Third, the use of self-reported data introduces a degree of limitation. In the quantitative part of the study, measures such as self-reported language ability and personality traits depended entirely on participants' subjective assessments, which cannot be independently verified. As previous research has suggested, individuals are not always accurate in evaluating their own abilities or performance and often tend to overestimate their competence (Narciss et al., 2011). This limitation may be even more pronounced in the qualitative interviews. Chinese international students may have been influenced by face concerns and therefore may not have fully disclosed their genuine thoughts or difficulties. Similarly, some Australian tutors expressed concerns during the interviews that their remarks might later be used against them, particularly when discussing institutional issues such as workload or compensation, which led to cautious responses. In such contexts, the perspectives expressed by both Chinese international students and Australian tutors may not fully reflect their true experiences and feelings. Future research should consider incorporating more accurate and objective measures to complement self-reported data, in order to minimise idealised responses and further enhance the validity of the findings.

Fourth, it is important to acknowledge the contextual and cultural specificity of the findings. Regarding the educational setting, this study is situated within the Australian higher education context, which is characterised by a strong emphasis on critical dialogue and active participation in tutorial sessions. The challenges identified, particularly in the Behavioural factor, are closely tied to outputs and these specific pedagogical expectations and may not be fully generalisable to educational systems where lecture-based or teacher-centred instruction remains dominant. At the same time, the challenges identified among Chinese international students reflect educational and cultural experiences commonly associated with Chinese schooling, such as exam-oriented assessment practices, teacher-centred pedagogy, and culturally

informed understandings of classroom authority. Hence, Fourth, it is important to acknowledge the contextual and cultural specificity of the findings. Regarding the educational setting, this study is situated within the Australian higher education context, which is characterised by a strong emphasis on critical dialogue and active participation in tutorial sessions. The challenges identified, particularly in the Behavioural factor, are closely tied to outputs and these specific pedagogical expectations and may not be fully generalisable to educational systems where lecture-based or teacher-centred instruction remains dominant. At the same time, the challenges identified among Chinese international students reflect educational and cultural experiences commonly associated with Chinese schooling, such as exam-oriented assessment practices, teacher-centred pedagogy, and culturally informed understandings of classroom authority, rather than from either context alone. Hence, It should be with caution when extending them to other national, institutional, or cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the underlying interactional mechanisms identified in this study, such as mismatched expectations, developing communication awareness, and the negotiated nature of classroom participation, may offer transferable insights for research on intercultural competence development in other international higher education settings.

7.5.2 Recommendations for future research

In this study, the application of the intercultural competence model to the Australian classroom context revealed an unexpected result. Almost all participants' concerns regarding language blurred the initial boundaries between the three factors. Many of the issues identified within the affective, knowledge, and behavioural components were closely linked to participants' language reserve and the fluency with which they applied language in real classroom interactions. This observation accentuates the imperative for future research on enhancing intercultural competence to prioritise the systematic integration of a coherent and rigorously defined set of language-related

assessment criteria within existing theoretical models. As Byram (2021) identified, previous intercultural competence models have not placed sufficient emphasis on language. Focusing more on language in multicultural classrooms can help improve the alignment between participants' expressed experiences and the coding frameworks employed in empirical investigations. Such integration would not only improve the comprehensiveness of research findings but also foster more understanding of how language proficiency interplays with broader intercultural competence constructs.

Second, as noted in this study, personality has been demonstrated to exert a positive predictive influence across the three core factors of intercultural competence. However, recent studies attention to the role of personality within intercultural competence research remains limited, with much of the existing literature focusing primarily on intercultural sensitivity (Aksin, 2023) and intercultural prejudice (Genkova et al., 2021). A widely accepted and comprehensive theoretical framework that fully integrates personality within the broader construct of intercultural competence is still underdeveloped and lacks clarity. Therefore, future research should explicitly incorporate personality as a key individual difference variable within intercultural competence frameworks, critically examining how specific personality traits influence the developmental trajectory of intercultural competence. Additionally, other individual difference factors, such as familial background and regional disparities, particularly distinctions between more developed and less developed areas in China, should also be considered. Advancing research along these lines will contribute to the construction of more theoretical models and strengthen the empirical foundation of the field.

Third, the concept of small culture has increasingly attracted attention within academic discourse. Holliday (2022) argues that intercultural studies should focus more on cultural practices within specific contexts rather than relying on macro-level, nation-based cultural generalisations. In other words, while large culture frameworks provide broad patterns of cultural differences across national groups, focusing on

individuals' situated cultural practices in new environments may offer a more flexible and context-sensitive understanding of intercultural competence. In future research on intercultural competence in international classrooms, a comparative approach could be adopted. Such an approach could empirically explore how fostering a supportive small-group cultural environment and minimising negative labelling can facilitate the Pygmalion effect while mitigating the emergence of the Golem effect. Such teacher-mediated, facilitative interventions may significantly influence the development of students' intercultural competence at the individual level. Furthermore, the ongoing debate over cultural essentialism is increasingly evident in this scholarly discourse. The concept of small culture directly challenges essentialist perspectives by highlighting that culture is neither fixed nor static. Instead, an analytical focus on small cultures enables researchers to better capture the fluidity and multiplicity inherent in cultural experiences, offering a more context-sensitive understanding of intercultural interactions.

In addition, as mentioned in the limitations section. Chinese international students are significantly influenced by Confucian heritage values, such as high power distance, face negotiation, and the maintenance of harmony. Consequently, while the modified theoretical framework (incorporating language and personality) may have broader applicability, the specific behavioural manifestations identified in this study are unique to the intersection of Chinese cultural norms and Western academic expectations. Future research would benefit from comparative studies involving international students from non-Confucian backgrounds to further isolate the influence of cultural specificity versus general cross-cultural adaptation challenges.

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¹ "Arasaratnam" and "Arasaratnam-Smith" are the same person (Lily Arasaratnam-Smith) publishing under different surnames.

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Appendix A: Student survey

Questionnaire for Students

* All information provided will be kept strictly confidential *

1. Age

- Under 22 Between 22-26 Between 26-30 Above 30

2. Gender

- Male Female Prefer not to answer

3. Current study

- Bachelor degree Master degree PhD

4. English language test scores (IELTS, PTE, TOEFL)

5. To what extent do you consider yourself to be introverted or extroverted?

- Very introverted Introverted Not obvious Extroverted Very extroverted

Intercultural competence scale

Do you think the following situations match up with you when you interact with tutors ?

1 Extremely unconfident 2 Unconfident 3 Not sure 4 Confidence 5 Extremely confidence

Affective part

Degree of confidence

| When you interact with tutors | Extremely unconfident | Unconfident | Not sure | Confidence | Extremely confidence |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. I maintain a positive attitude | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 2. I am willing to listen to their perspectives | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 3. I am highly patient | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 4. I am respecting them | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 5. I am trusting them | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 6. I am open-minded to different culture | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 7. I have a strong desire to ask | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 8. I feel motivated | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 9. I feel easily to talk in front of them. | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 10. I willing initiate discussions in classes | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |

| | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|
| 11. I ask questions without hesitation | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 12. I actively look for opportunities to engage with them | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 13. I consciously communicate in an equal manner | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 14. I will put myself in others' perspectives | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 15. I can compare myself with Australian classrooms | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 16. I appreciate of equal way in classrooms | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 17. I recognise cultural diversity as an asset | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 18. I perceive cultural situations as one of my strengths. | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 19. I have a deep sense of understanding of other value and perspectives. | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 20. I feel comfortable and familiar | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 21. I feel no pressure. | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 22. I feel at ease when receiving feedback, even if it is critical | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 23. I feel no barriers and have a sense of belonging | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |

Knowledge part

| When you in Australian classrooms | Degree of confidence | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|-------------|----------|------------|----------------------|
| | Extremely unconfident | Unconfident | Not sure | Confidence | Extremely confidence |
| 24. I am aware of the cultural differences in communication | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 25. I am aware of communicative norms here | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 26. I aware of some of the reasons for miscommunications | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 27. I aware of each other's interaction habits | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 28. I willing to try if conscious of the basic norms of the Australian classroom | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 29. I can recognise correct English sentence structure | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 30. I can recognise appropriate vocabulary and grammar usage | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 31. I can recognise tutor's metaphorical | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 32. I can identify their titles accurately | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 33. I can understand different cultural | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |

| symbols | | | | | |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|
| 34. I can understand the reasons for different atmosphere of classrooms compared with my country | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 35. I can understand their values and cultural taboos | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 36. I can understand different hierarchical relationship between myself and my tutors | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |

Behaviour part

| When you interact with tutors | Degree of confidence | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-------------|----------|------------|----------------------|
| | Extremely unconfident | Unconfident | Not sure | Confidence | Extremely confidence |
| 37. I can express my thoughts clearly in different ways | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 38. I actively observe communication patterns | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 39. I try to remember and imitate successful communication patterns | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 40. I have different strategies for handling various communication situation | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 41. I can speak with an appropriate grasp of context (e.g. occasion, time, audience and topic) | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 42. I can use local language effectively and appropriately | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 43. I focus on ensuring that my comments do not offend the tutor | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 44. I analyse the elements of culturally-influenced interactive (e.g. compliments and ways of responding) | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 45. I can use vocabularies and grammar correctly | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 46. I challenge parts that I doubt in a mild and indirective way | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 47. I would toward a harmonious environment | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 48. I will response politely | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 49. I respect their authority in classrooms | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |
| 50. I consider the other person's cultural perspective | ○1 | ○2 | ○3 | ○4 | ○5 |

| | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 51. I am cautious that there are differences between individuals | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 52. I willing to maintain a good relationship with them through my way | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 53. I make conscious efforts to consider if my behaviour might offend | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 54. I will focus on communication conflicts caused by culture | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 55. I often observe and careful the subtle differences. | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| 56. I carefully deal with cultural differences. | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |

_____ End of the scale _____

Open questions:

1. What are the main difficulties in interacting with tutors for you?

2. Which were the most difficult units you studied in Australia? What made them the most difficult? (Subject? Language? Or something else?)

3. On which units have you found most beneficial for participating and interaction in class?

I will interview some Chinese International students in Australia

Would you like to be interviewed?

- Yes
- No

If you would like to be interviewed, please leave a contact detail: _____

Or if you would like to contact me in any of the ways listed on information sheets, I would welcome and appreciate it.

Appendix B: Chinese international students interview protocol

Focus on "what was done", "when and where it was done", "who did it", "how it was done ", and "why"

A brief introduction.

1. Explaining the purpose of the study to the interviewees.
2. Obtain consent from participants to record and take notes.

General questions part.

1. When did you enter Australia
2. What made you choose Australia? If they cannot answer directly then guide to the following questions:

What motivated you to come to Australia, or

What did your family and friends think of you coming to Australia, or

What is the reason for coming to Australia?

Core field one (Affective part)

Exploratory questions

1. Compared with your study experience in China, how do you feel about Australian classrooms?
2. What are your concerns about to take the initiative to discuss questions with tutors in class?
What influence do you think (based on answers) has?
3. Have you ever met a tutor who made you feel truly understood? If yes, please describe the situation.
4. Have you felt a sense of distance when interacting with tutors here?
5. Do you feel that adapting to the classroom here is a psychological burden, or have you already become used to it? Please explain how you feel and what impact this has.
6. Have you tried to overcome (based on answers)? If yes, how?

Transition question.

What kind of help or support would you like from Australian tutors or the university?

Core field two (Knowledge part)

Exploratory questions

1. What does Australian classroom looks like? Biggest difference with Chinese classrooms?
2. When did you first realise that Australian classrooms place strong emphasis on interaction and discussion?
3. Which course did you feel you gained the most intercultural knowledge from?

4. What is the biggest barrier for you in understanding classroom interaction or learning course content? Is it language? Why? example?
5. Has the Australian classroom environment helped you improve your language skills? Why or why not?
6. What are the biggest differences in interaction etiquette between Chinese classrooms and Australian classrooms?
7. In classroom interaction what make you feel very different from what you experienced in China?

Transition question.

Are there any classroom norms you want to know more about?

Core field three (Behaviour part)

Exploratory questions

1. How do you feel about your spoken English? Is there a difference between the language you practised in class and the language you learned before? Why?
2. When you have a different opinion from your tutor, how do you express it? Why?
3. Have you ever experienced a tutor's answer or feedback that surprised you or made you feel uncomfortable? How did you understand and deal with it?
4. What are your current strategies or approaches to interacting with Australian tutors? Why?
5. What do you think is the key to improving classroom interaction skills??

Additional questions.

What intercultural aspects do you feel you have learned over here?

Which ones did you learn before?

What has changed? (Can guide from previous answers)

Appendix C: Australian tutor interview protocol

Australian tutors interview protocol

You will be required to participate in an interview regarding the intercultural communication competence of Chinese international students. The interview is expected to take approximately 45 minutes. The interview content will revolve around your experiences with Chinese international students and will specifically focus on three main areas: affective, knowledge, and behaviour. The interview will be recorded, and you can review the information on the participant information sheets. Additionally, you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to respond to.

A brief introduction.

3. Explaining the purpose of the study to the interviewees.
4. Obtain consent from participants to record and take notes.

General questions.

3. What department are you in?
4. When did you first meet/teach Chinese international students, and did you remember anything most impressive characteristic about them?

Certainty questions (Circle or write down key words)

1. When interacting with Chinese international students in the classroom, what do you consider to be the most important factors? Equality? Language? Culture? Or integration? What is your preferred method of interacting in the classroom, and could you explain why? Could you share your thoughts on Australian classroom structures?

Core Field One (Affective part)

Exploratory questions

1. Based on your observations, what is the attitudes of Chinese international students in Australian classrooms? Are they shy or openness?
2. Are they active participants? Why? Motivation?
3. What is your primary concern regarding the interaction with Chinese international students in the classroom?
4. How do you usually handle topics that involve conflicting views in the classroom?
5. Have you ever studied or lived in a different cultural environment? If yes, did these experiences influence your understanding of the challenges faced by international students?
6. How do you think we can avoid making them feel stressed?
7. In your opinion, how long do Chinese international students usually take to adapt to the Australian academic environment?

Transition questions

1. Have you made any preparations before teaching Chinese international students?

Core field Two (Knowledge part)

Exploratory questions

1. Based on your observation, what features do students from the Chinese education system usually show in terms of “communication awareness”?
2. When facing Chinese students who lack of awareness of interaction in classrooms, what strategies do you use to encourage them and help them develop such awareness?
3. Many students mentioned that English language is still challenging for them. What are your thoughts on this? Are you concerned about their language issues in the classroom?
4. Do you think some in-class real-time translation software or electronic dictionaries are more advantageous than disadvantageous for students?
5. Have you ever thought about cultural differences, such as collectivism vs. individualism, or concepts like "face"? How do you view stereotypes?
6. How do you think we can help Chinese students understand what an Australian classroom is really like?

Transition questions.

1. Which intercultural aspects do you feel you have learnt from Chinese?

Core field three (Behaviour part)

1. Have you ever felt that Chinese students tend to use written-style expressions when speaking in classrooms? If so, what influences does this have? What are your current strategies or approaches for helping them?
2. Do you ever feel a sense of distance or a hierarchical relationship when communicating with Chinese international students? (Title and collectivist aspects)
3. Which of their behaviours do you find understandable?
4. How do you evaluate the flexibility of Chinese students in responding to classroom situations? Do you think their adjustments come from creative thinking, or are they more like a strategic response to meet tutors’ expectations? In your opinion, what are the expectations for how Chinese international students should demonstrate intercultural communication competence? Do you think their behaviour aligns with your expectations or with Australian classroom norms?

Additional areas.

1. What do you believe makes an ideal tutor for students in the classroom? What actions should they take?
2. Have you tried new ways of interacting with Chinese international students? or would you change your communication pattern for the sense of students from different cultural backgrounds.

3. Would you offer any advice to Chinese international students who are about to come to Australia but haven't arrived yet, especially in terms of interacting with tutors?

Appendix D: Ethics approval letter



Research Integrity & Ethics Administration HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Friday, 20 January 2023

Prof Linda (Tie Hua) Tsung
Discipline of Chinese Studies; Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Email: linda.tsung@sydney.edu.au

Dear Linda (Tie Hua),

The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has considered your application. I am pleased to inform you that after consideration of your response, your project has been approved.

Details of the approval are as follows:

Project No.: 2022/651
Project Title: Intercultural competence of Chinese international students in Australian classrooms
Authorised Personnel: Tsung Linda (Tie Hua); Han Jiangyu;
Approval Period: 19/01/2023 to 19/01/2027
First Annual Report Due: 19/01/2024

Documents Approved:

| Date Uploaded | Version Number | Document Name |
|---------------|----------------|--|
| 02/01/2023 | | Flyer |
| 02/01/2023 | v4 | pis interview english version 4 |
| 02/01/2023 | v4 | pis for survey english version 4 |
| 02/01/2023 | v4 | pcf interview english version 4 |
| 19/12/2022 | v3 | Australian tutors interview outline_version 3 |
| 19/12/2022 | | Chinese international students interview outline new_version |
| 19/12/2022 | | Recruitment letter |
| 19/12/2022 | | QR code for the survey |
| 08/08/2022 | | Questionnaires English version |

Condition/s of Approval

- Research must be conducted according to the approved proposal.
- An annual progress report must be submitted to the Ethics Office on or before the anniversary of approval and on completion of the project.
- You must report as soon as practicable anything that might warrant review of ethical approval of the project including:
 - Serious or unexpected adverse events (which should be reported within 72 hours).
 - Unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
- Any changes to the proposal must be approved prior to their implementation (except where an amendment is undertaken to eliminate *immediate* risk to participants).
- Personnel working on this project must be sufficiently qualified by education, training and experience for their role, or adequately supervised. Changes to personnel must be reported and approved.
- Personnel must disclose any actual or potential conflicts of interest, including any financial or other interest or affiliation, as relevant to this project.

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ABN 15 211 513 464
CRICOS 00026A

- Data and primary materials must be retained and stored in accordance with the relevant legislation and University guidelines.
- Ethics approval is dependent upon ongoing compliance of the research with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*, applicable legal requirements, and with University policies, procedures and governance requirements.
- The Ethics Office may conduct audits on approved projects.
- The Chief Investigator has ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research and is responsible for ensuring all others involved will conduct the research in accordance with the above.

This letter constitutes ethical approval only.

Please contact the Ethics Office should you require further information or clarification.

Sincerely,



Associate Professor Haryana Dillon
Chair
Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 3)

The University of Sydney of Sydney HRECs are constituted and operate in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research \(2018\)](#) and the NHMRC's [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research \(2018\)](#)

Appendix E: Conference presentations during candidature

Conference presentations:

1. SLC HDR Research Day at the University of Sydney (November 2023)

Title: Intercultural Competence of Chinese International Students in Australian Classrooms.

2. Engagement in the Digital Age: International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning at Hong Kong Baptist University (June 2024)

Title: Exploring Chinese international students' knowledge challenges and tutors' expectations in Australian classrooms

3. Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU) Eighth Biennial Colloquium at the University of Sydney (November 2024)

Title: Exploring Chinese international students' affective challenges and tutors' expectations in Australian classrooms

Appendix F: Chinese international students' participants in interview

| Name | Gender | Faculty/School | Major | Levels | Length in Australia |
|------------|--------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Student 1 | Male | Business school | Finance | Master | 2 Year 3 Months |
| Student 2 | Female | Business school | Marketing | Master | 9 Months |
| Student 3 | Female | Medicine and Health | Exercise Physiology | Master | 9 Months |
| Student 4 | Male | Science | Agriculture | Master | 2 Year 3 Months |
| Student 5 | Male | Science | Mathematics | Bachelor | 1 Year 3 Months |
| Student 6 | Female | Business school | Finance | Bachelor | 1 Year 3 Months |
| Student 7 | Female | Education and social work | TESOL | Master | 4 Months |
| Student 8 | Female | Art, Communication and English | Communication | Master | 1 Year 9 Months |
| Student 9 | Female | Law school | Criminal Law | Bachelor | 1 Year 3 Months |
| Student 10 | Male | Science | Computer science | Master | 9 Months |
| Student 11 | Female | Languages and culture | Linguistic | Master | 1 Year 3 Months |
| Student 12 | Female | Science | Biology | Bachelor | 9 Months |
| Student 13 | Male | Social and political sciences | Anthropology | Master | 9 Months |
| Student 14 | Male | Education and social work | TESOL | Bachelor | 9 Months |
| Student 15 | Male | Business school | Applied Finance | Bachelor & Master | 4 Years 3 Months |
| Student 16 | Female | Literature, art and media | Film | Bachelor & Master | 4 Years 3 Months |
| Student 17 | Male | Conservatorium of music | Performance | Master | 1 Year 9 Months |
| Student 18 | Female | Social and political sciences | Anthropology | Bachelor | 1 Year 9 Months |
| Student 19 | Female | Architecture, design and planning | Design | Master | 9 Months |
| Student 20 | Female | Law school | Law | Bachelor | 1 Year 3 Months |
| Student 21 | Male | Business school | Tourism | Master | 1 Year 3 Months |

Appendix G: Australian tutor participants in interview

| Name | Gender | Faculty/School | Field | Years of started teaching Chinese international students |
|----------|--------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Tutor 1 | Female | Law school | Criminal Law | Since 2022 |
| Tutor 2 | Female | Conservatorium of music | Musical cultures | Since 2009 |
| Tutor 3 | Male | Education and social work | English as second language | Since 2013 |
| Tutor 4 | Female | Social and political sciences | Intercultural relations | Since 2022 |
| Tutor 5 | Male | Education and social work | Education policy | N/A |
| Tutor 6 | Male | Education and social work | Social work | Since middle 90s |
| Tutor 7 | Male | Education and social work | Evaluating teaching | Since 1999 |
| Tutor 8 | Male | Business school | Finance | Since 2006 |
| Tutor 9 | Female | Business school | Analytics | Since 2017 |
| Tutor 10 | Male | Literature, art and media | Film | Since 2022 |
| Tutor 11 | Male | Languages and cultures | Cultural nationalism | Since 1997 |
| Tutor 12 | Male | Languages and cultures | Contemporary theatre | Since 1996 |
| Tutor 13 | Male | Languages and cultures | Chinese literature | Since 2017 |
| Tutor 14 | Male | Languages and cultures | Translation Study | Since 2004 |
| Tutor 15 | Male | Business school | Accounting | Since 2009 |
| Tutor 16 | Female | Social and political sciences | International Relations | Since 2011 |
| Tutor 17 | Female | Languages and cultures | Second Language Acquisition | Since 2020 |