

"Lost in Transition": A Thematic Analysis of Chinese Students' Learning Challenges in a Sino-Foreign Cooperative Program

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ABSTRACT

Sino-foreign cooperative programs, both in China and internationally, represent a significant strategy for the internationalization of higher education. Nonetheless, cross-border learners have numerous learning issues, and their practical experience is remain underexplored that needs to be studied deeper. This research paper will seek to probe into the learning challenges of the students on cooperative programs in detail. A qualitative research design was employed to interview 24 cooperative student participants in semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis approach as suggested by Braun and Clarke was used to code and analyze the data. Using the thematic approach, three central themes were identified: (1) The "dual gate" of academic adjustment: Students experience a combination of problems, which is both a feature of surface challenges and deep discontinuities; (2) The "breakdown band" of project support: The project is characterized by the structural failures, creating a feature of discontinuities both on the surface and in depth; (3) The suspension of value expectations: Students remain unaware of how the cumulative lack of systematic support and difficulties in individual adaptation collectively contribute to the learning problems they experience in cooperative educational programs. It is suggested to establish an academic transition course, frequent guidance, and value communication channel so as to assist students to get through the confusion in the transitional stage.

Key words: Sino-Foreign Cooperative Program ; Learning Challenges; Theme Analysis; Student Experience; Support System

INTRODUCTION

Sino-foreign cooperative education has been a significant strategic initiative in the internationalization of higher education in China since the onset of this century and has been going through a rapid growth(Zhang, 2023). Statistics indicate that so far there are more than 2,000 Sino-foreign cooperative educational institutions and programs granted by the Ministry of Education, with the enrolled students numbering are more than 600,000 across most provinces in the country(Sun, 2022). The emergence of this model of education brings various implications: the introduction of the foreign educational resources of high quality, the development of talents, which are competitive in the global market, and the teaching reform of the local higher education. On the one hand, the high rate of increase in the number of projects has made the problem of the risk of resource dilution more serious; on the other hand, society started doubting the effective performance of talent development level in Sino-foreign cooperative education. The perception of competitiveness of such graduates by employers, and the anticipated academic benefits that students receive upon the investment of high tuition fees, have not been

answered fully, yet they directly impact on the sustainable development of the Sino-foreign cooperative education(Xue & Li, 2021).

In existing studies, discussions on the quality of Sino-foreign cooperative education mostly focus on the macro level, including policy text analysis, curriculum system design, teacher team building, and management model comparison(Xiao, 2024; Zhang, 2023; Sun, 2022). These studies undoubtedly provide an important foundation for understanding the institutional framework of cooperative education, but they largely obscure the core subjects of education - the students. The real experiences of students in the classroom, the specific academic difficulties they face in a cross-border educational context, and how they seek to adapt in the gap between the two educational paradigms - these issues are rarely touched upon in the existing literature (Smrynova-Trybulska et al., 2022). However, it is precisely these micro-level learning experiences that constitute the most genuine background of educational quality. Even if a project has a perfect institutional design, if students continuously feel confused, frustrated, and at a loss during their daily learning, then "high quality" can only remain at the textual level. Therefore, listening to students' voices and understanding the real dilemmas in the teaching and learning process from their perspective becomes an unavoidable starting point for evaluating and improving the quality of Sino-foreign cooperative education(Li, 2020).

Based on the above background, this study aims to deeply explore the learning difficulties faced by Chinese students in the cooperative education programs between China and foreign countries, and to reveal the underlying structural reasons. Specifically, this study intends to investigate the specific academic challenges that students have encountered in the program, how these challenges are mediated by individual factors and the program environment, how students perceive and evaluate the support system of the program and its value returns(Hang & Zhang, 2025). Through in-depth interviews with students participating in the program, using the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun & Clarke(Clarke & Braun, 2017), this study aims to go beyond the description of surface difficulties and reach a deeper understanding of students' predicaments, not only the difficulties they have encountered, but also "why these difficulties are difficulties" and "why they persist". Finally, this study attempts to provide empirical evidence and practical insights from the students' perspective for the teaching improvement of cooperative education programs between China and foreign countries, and to promote this educational model from "scale expansion" to a deeper transformation towards "quality internalization"(Zou et al., 2022).

Research questions:

This study aims to deeply explore the learning difficulties faced by students in Chinese-foreign cooperative education programs and the structural causes behind these difficulties. Specifically, the research focuses on three core questions:

1. What specific academic challenges did the students encounter during the project?
2. How do students perceive the Sino-Foreign cooperative learning environment, and what role does the support system play in shaping their academic challenges?
3. How can students evaluate the overall value and return of international cooperation education programs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the deepening of the internationalization of higher education, transnational higher education (TNHE) has

become an important topic in global education research. The international academic community has accumulated a considerable amount of research on issues related to students' adaptation to transnational education. Existing studies have shown that the challenges faced by students in transnational educational environments are multi-dimensional and complex: at the language level, even with standardized tests, students still encounter significant obstacles in academic writing, classroom participation, and understanding of professional terms (Yang et al., 2025). At the teaching paradigm level, Western education emphasizes critical thinking, autonomous learning, and classroom interaction, which contrasts sharply with the "teacher-centered" model familiar to Asian students, easily causing cognitive dissonance and identity confusion (Tang, 2023). At the cultural adaptation level, students need to simultaneously deal with daily cultural differences and implicit rules in academic scenarios, and the dual pressure intensifies their psychological burden.

However, existing international research mostly focuses on the adaptation issues of international students in the Western mainstream education system, and the attention to the special situation of Sino-foreign cooperative education is relatively limited (Liyang, 2021; Lai & Jung, 2025; Quan, 2025). The uniqueness of Sino-foreign cooperative education lies in that students receive transnational education in the local environment without studying abroad, enjoying a certain degree of cultural familiarity while also having to cope with the impact of the introduced educational paradigm. This particularity makes it necessary to conduct further empirical tests to determine whether the existing research findings can be directly applied to the Chinese context.

The research on international cooperation education in the domestic academic circle has rapidly expanded along with the growth of such programs, forming an academic discourse system centered on quality assurance (Yanfang & Mohd Isa, 2024). It mainly focuses on three dimensions: policy and institutional research, management model research, and curriculum and teaching research. These studies have laid the foundation for understanding the institutional framework of international cooperation education, but their perspectives mostly remain at the macro-policy level, with insufficient attention paid to the educational subjects - students (Zhuang & Liu, 2022). Issues such as how students experience the institutional design, what learning difficulties they encounter, and how they evaluate the project support system are rarely touched upon in the existing literature. The few studies that focus on student experiences mostly adopt quantitative questionnaire surveys, focusing on satisfaction measurement, and are unable to capture the deep structure and dynamic process of the difficulties (Winstone, 2022). As some scholars have pointed out, the research on international cooperation education urgently needs to shift from a "system-centered" approach to a "learning-centered" one, placing students' micro-learning experiences at the core of the research.

In order to explain analytically the multi-dimensional and structural complexity of the learning problems facing international cooperative education among the students, the proposed study applies the ecosystem theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner as the framework of analysis (Tong & An, 2024). The theory focuses on the fact that the development of an individual is embedded into several interrelated environmental systems and affected by several levels of factors. In particular, the learning issues of students focused on the direct experience of the classroom situation, peer relations, and relations with the teacher are analyzed at the microsystem level, while issues related to the social recognition, employment sphere, and expectations of parents are analyzed at the macrosystem level. By introducing ecosystem theory to systematically address the challenges in this study, we avoid attributing these challenges to mere individual abilities, reveal the interactivity of the systems, present an analytical approach to understanding the mediating role of support systems, offer a theoretical approach to integrating the coding dimensions of this study, and allow the research results to be elevated beyond empirical description to theoretical explanation (Rahma et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participants

The study adopts a qualitative research, using the epistemological paradigm of interpretivism, which seeks to comprehend the subjective meaning of the learning experiences of the students in the Chinese-foreign cooperative education programs in an effort to understand the subject matter in a greater depth. The research used a purposive sampling method to identify 24 students in the cooperative education program of a Chinese eastern university as the research subjects. The sample includes the various grades of freshmen to senior year and diversity in terms of gender and academic performance in to have the most comprehensive information to answer the research questions. The respondents were all volunteers and signed an informed consent form. All personal information regarding identity has been anonymized.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview was used as a method of data collection. An interview outline was elaborated on the basis of literature review and the way research questions were designed. The main questions touched four areas including academic problems, evaluation of the learning setting, improvement recommendations, and open-ended discussion. All the respondents were interviewed one by one and the duration of the interview was between 60 and 90 minutes. Interpretation of the interviews was done within 24 hours and transcribed.

Data Saturation

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Following Guest et al. (2006), saturation was defined as the point at which three consecutive interviews yielded no new codes or themes. Saturation was reached after the 21st interview, with the remaining three interviews confirming existing themes and providing no additional insights. This ensured that the data collected were sufficient to address the research questions.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data with six-stage process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): the first stage was the open coding that resulted in the identification of seven initial codes: language barriers, academic pressure, adaptation to the Western paradigm, resource gaps, execution deviations, guidance vacuum and investment return anxiety. These were then combined with the help of the axial coding into three main themes.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, we employed two strategies based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research. Member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries to five participants to verify the accuracy of our interpretations; all five confirmed that the identified themes resonated with their experiences, and no substantial corrections were requested. Moreover, peer debriefing was carried out by inviting two independent researchers with expertise in qualitative methods and higher education to review the coding scheme and theme development; their feedback was incorporated to refine the thematic structure and reduce potential researcher bias.

The figure below illustrates the flowchart of the research method:

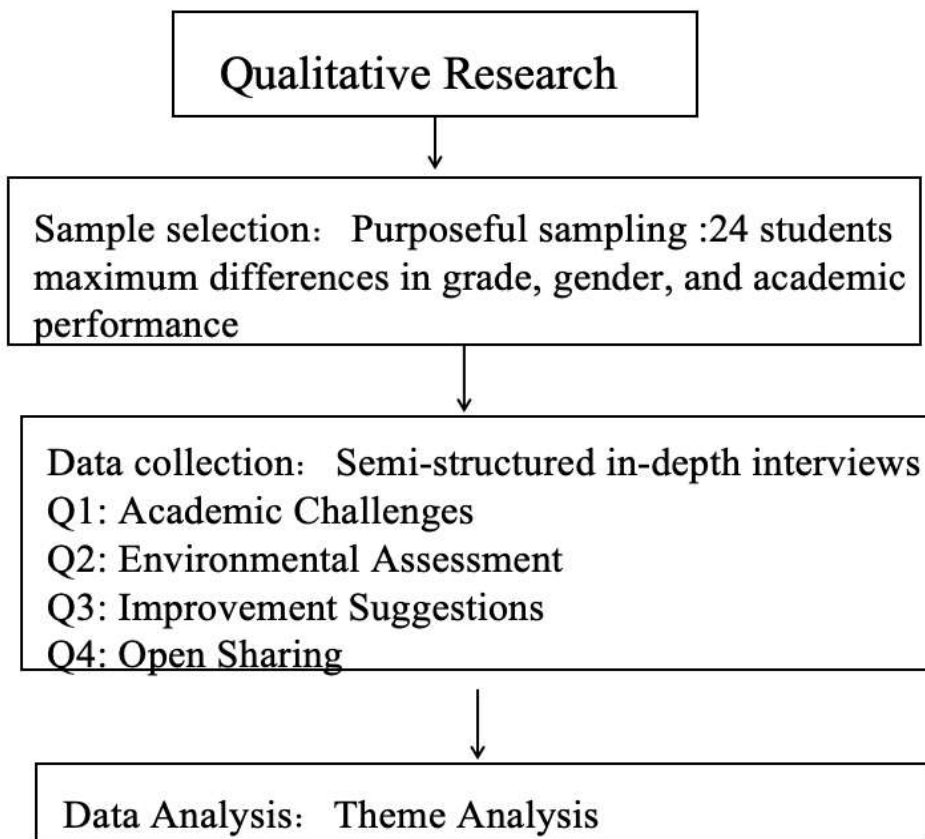


Figure 1: The flowchart of the research method

FINDINGS

In the systematic use of thematic analysis, the study was able to identify three key themes using the interview data of 24 respondents: (1) academic adaptation; (2) project support; (3) value expectations. The themes have a number of sub-themes, all of which represent the complex image of learning problems encountered by students in Sino-foreign collaborative education programs. The three themes identified in this study correspond to different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Theme 1 (academic adaptation) operates at the microsystem level, reflecting students' direct interactions with faculty, peers, and course content. Theme 2 (project support) operates at the mesosystem and exosystem levels, capturing structural failures and disconnections between support systems. Theme 3 (value expectations) operates at the macrosystem level, reflecting broader cultural and societal uncertainties about the value of cooperative education. Each theme is discussed in detail below. Table 1 demonstrates the coding direction of the primary code to core themes.

Table 1: Integrated Pathway of Themes

Initial Coding	Axis Coding	Core Theme
Language barriers, academic pressure	Surface barrier: Language and academic pressure	Theme 1: "Double Gate" of Academic Adaptation
Western paradigm adaptation	Deep gap: Teaching paradigm and cultural conflict	Theme 1: "Double Gate" of Academic Adaptation
Resource gap,	Structural break in support	Theme 2: "Break Band" of Project Support

execution deviation, guidance vacuum	system	
Return on investment anxiety	Suspension of value expectations	Theme 3: "Suspension" of Value Expectations

Theme 1: "Double Gate" of Academic Adaptation — Microsystem Level

The results demonstrate that academic adaptation of the students is a complex process that is characterized by a number of issues on both levels: students have to struggle with language barriers and academic pressure; deeper, they have to struggle with changes in pedagogical paradigms, cultural clashes. These layers are interrelated, and they all make up the crux of the predicament of academic adaptation of students.

"The exam pressure is layered. In my Financial Accounting exam, I have to decode the question in English, apply accounting principles, calculate in English numerical formats, then express my reasoning in grammatically acceptable English—all under time pressure." (ST07)

"The listening fatigue in lectures is cumulative. Foreign Professors speak naturally fast. I can maintain intense concentration for maybe 30 minutes, then my brain just shuts down. I record lectures and re-listen at 0.75 speed, which takes double time. By Year 3, I developed strategic selective attention—focusing on key terms, accepting I'll miss digressions." (ST10/M)

These two respondents show the essences of the academic adaptation of students in Sino-foreign cooperative education, which are multi-dimensional pressure and strategic adaptation. The former one was force to tackle the language understanding, professional knowledge, computational functions, and grammar expression at the same time when under examination. The second student had strategic development of brain shutdown to audio recording and replaying, to selective attention, and this was active adaptation to language saturation. Both stories together signal that there is a strong interconnection between language-related problems and academic stress, and the adaptation mechanism of the students is not a one-dimensional cross, but instead a gradual process of development of their unique coping mechanisms, as a result of trial and error. At the microsystem level, these findings reveal how direct classroom interactions shape students' academic adaptation.

Theme 2: "Break Band" of Project Support— Mesosystem Level

The second theme demonstrates flaws in the structure of the support system of the project. There was a common emotional tone to the participants: it combined anticipation and disappointment. The international learning environment which was being encouraged in the project material failed to materialize in practicum and this gave rise to several fractures. On the resource level, the lack of enough textbooks on English, restricted teaching time with foreign professors, and the lack of a language support center were frequently reported. Such shortages of resources had a direct negative effect on their learning outcomes.

"The silence in my first foreign-taught class was deafening. Professor Williams asked a question and waited. And waited. In Chinese high school, we chorus answers or the teacher calls on someone. Here, he expected voluntary individual contribution. I knew the answer but couldn't make myself speak. In China, speaking without invitation is disruptive; here, silence is disengagement." (ST01)

"For my thesis, I needed access to JSTOR and other specialized international business databases, but the library only has very limited licenses. We have to spend extra money and find alternative ways on our own to access these foreign academic resources. My classmates at partner universities abroad enjoy unlimited access to these materials as a basic entitlement. By comparison, it often feels like we are participating in an international

program, but still limited by domestic academic infrastructure.”(ST19)

“Career guidance here is a joke for SFCE students. The career center holds massive lectures about domestic civil service exams and state-owned enterprise recruitment—completely irrelevant to my plans, and totally unrelated to students like us who want to work in foreign companies or organizations that value international program backgrounds.” (ST06)

These three accounts demonstrate that there are a number of cracks in the support mechanism of Sino-foreign cooperative programs. Students are torn between passive response mode, which they are familiar with and active participation that they are supposed to take in Western style classrooms. Such academic resources as databases, which are openly accessible to students in partner universities internationally, will need additional fee or intricate workaround. Career services concentrate on domestic tests and state owned employment leaving out students who are interested in international employment. These setbacks come as students move from the campus to the job market. They are caught in a dilemma, facing both international opportunities and domestic challenges. At the mesosystem and exosystem levels, these findings expose structural gaps between different support systems.

Theme 3: "Suspension" of Value Expectations— Macrosystem Level

The third theme is also related to a deeper question: how students justify their choice to follow a Sino-Foreign cooperative program. Between the high tuition fees and future expectations, they are still in the state of suspension in terms of their value perceptions. The issue of tuition was mentioned almost by all the participants. The cost of Sino-Foreign cooperative programs is very expensive compared to the normal undergraduate degrees and it is a huge burden to the students and their families. The effect of this pressure is that their expectations and anxieties on the payoff of their investment are increased.

“Now that graduation’s around the corner, I’m even more stressed about the money we’ve spent. I’ve started interviewing for jobs, and the reality’s hit me hard. Local employers do like my English skills, but they don’t pay a higher starting salary to make up for the big investment my family made in my education. One interviewer even said it straight: “Your international background is a nice plus, but we pay according to the position, not what kind of degree you have.”(ST23)

“I did a rough calculation: four years of tuition plus living expenses will add up to nearly 300,000 yuan. If I’d gone for a regular university program, the total would only be about 80,000 yuan. My parents always say education is the best investment, but I can’t help wondering if this particular investment is really worthwhile in our local context. Graduates from Beijing and Shanghai might get higher salaries that make this cost worthwhile, but here in Chongqing, the job market still doesn’t fully recognize the value of international qualifications. I’m really worried that my efforts won’t be proportional to the returns I get” (ST08)

The two accounts put together clarify the dual dilemma of suspended value anticipation and the difference of returns in the region in Sino-foreign collaborative education. As one student discovered, their English skills did not help them get better pay, the employers were more than happy with their English skills, but told them straight-out that a position matters more than a degree- salaries are not given based on their international background. The other student also contrasted sharply on the 300, 000 yuan tuition and the 80, 000 yuan tuition of getting a regular degree where the employment sector fails to appreciate the so-called international premium in the job market, as they dread the possibility of a seriously disproportionate imbalance between investment and payoff. The two stories demonstrate that expectations represented by high tuition fees can no longer be met in local salary frameworks which puts in an abysmal state of fear and doubt on the perception of value among students. At the macrosystem level, these findings reflect broader societal and cultural uncertainties regarding the value of cooperative education.

DISCUSSION

By making the three main themes fit into each other, it is possible to observe the logical sequence of the plight that students have to face in Sino-foreign cooperative education in a rather logical manner (Wang, 2024). When it comes to the micro level, students are subjected to the agony of academic adjustment (Theme 1), which involves language barrier, academic stress, and contradiction with teaching paradigms. This suffering is not in isolation, but it is reinforced by the failure of the support system at the meso level (Theme 2) - the unavailability of resources, the missteps in implementation, and the unavailability of guidance, which results in the lack of support that the students receive in the context of the adaptation process. Over time, such an accumulated dilemma results in an underlying challenge to the worthiness of the project, on a macro level (Theme 3) with students suspended between a high-investing and uncertain-paying picture of value. The combination of the three themes defines the changing course of predicaments of students who face the challenges of adapting to a new environment and then turning to the form of no support and then to the form of doubt regarding the value (Mulaudzi, 2023).

The above-mentioned path finds an effective instrument of analysis in the introduction of the ecosystem theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (Amali, et al., 2023). The lack of interaction between teachers and students, lack of peer support in the micro system, inefficiency in linking different resources by the project manager in the meso system, and the support system becoming a fracture zone in the macro system further complicate the alleviation of the academic pain in students, and only after establishing social recognition, the price of the job market becomes a grey area, thus making the students even more anxious (Perera, 2023). The three systems are placed consecutively and support each other, together creating the learning predicament of the students and making them profoundly lost.

In this way, this research provides more insight into the phenomenon of the "Lost in Transition": the fact that students become disoriented is not a cross-cultural issue that occurs temporarily, but a structural issue because of the lack of support systems (DeCapua, 2025). They lack adaptability, but at each critical change of direction, they simply do not have the scaffoldings of support that they require - no courses in transition, no academic advising, no career advising. This lack of structural support intensifies the struggle of the individual and the disorientation is a more focused expression of systematic problems on an individual level.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study identifies the multi-dimensional challenges experienced by students in the Sino-foreign cooperative education the dual barrier to academic adaptation, which is language and teaching paradigms, the intermediary zone of support system, which is resource allocation and execution deviations, and the ; and the suspension of value perception, which is high investment and uncertainty of returns. These three themes are progressive and interrelated, and together they form the overall predicament of the students. The findings can be used in the discussion of the research on the adaptation of students to cross-border higher education, as it offers empirical evidence from the Chinese context on the issue and also confirms that the ecosystem theory is applicable in the analysis of the student experience in cooperative education - the problem of disorientation in students is not the result of a lack of individual ability, but rather a structural problem resulting from the intertwining and reinforcing of micro, meso, and macro systems.

According to the above conclusions, the research offers the following practical recommendations. For the "double gate" of the academic adaptation, the following measures are to be taken: for the support system at the

break point, the full-process academic support system that is comprised of the stable team of Chinese and foreign teachers, the permanent academic counseling center and the peer mentor program should be provided; for the third aspect of the assistance system, which is the suspension of the value perception, strengthening of the cooperation between the school and the enterprise, clarifying the way to further education, and relieving students' anxiety are recommended. This paper is a single-case investigation. Multi-case comparison or follow-up studies in the future can be performed to further confirm the research results and also expand upon them.

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