

Role of Prior Intercultural Learning in Chinese University Students' Cross-cultural Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

With the increased prevalence of studying abroad, cross-cultural adaptation of students studying in foreign countries has become more important. How international students' experience of cross-cultural adaptation can be enhanced is thus worth exploring. Focusing on the pre-departure period, this study investigates how Chinese students in tertiary education prepare with intercultural learning before studying abroad, how their prior intercultural learning experience influences their cross-cultural adaptation, and how their perceptions of prior intercultural learning impact their experience. From qualitative interview data, this research found that 1) Chinese university students who had study abroad experience generally engaged in prior intercultural learning in many ways to varying degrees, but they were likely to overestimate the adequacy of their prior intercultural learning; 2) prior

intercultural learning was necessary for international students' successful cross-cultural adaptation, but it had a limited influence and needed to be practiced in intercultural encounters to optimize such adaptation. With related suggestions for facilitating prior intercultural learning, this study offered insights into how Chinese university students and other stakeholders involved in these students' study abroad experience could take advantage of the

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pre-departure period to produce better outcomes in overseas students' cross-cultural adaptation.

Keywords: Cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural learning, international students, study abroad, teaching culture

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the number of university students choosing to study abroad has increased. Studying abroad has become common among tertiary-level students, regardless of whether they are enrolled in a full-time study program or an exchange study abroad program. In comparison with their counterparts studying in their home countries, international students have to deal with the additional difficulties of cross-cultural adaptation to the different living and learning environments in foreign countries. Some studies focusing on international students' study abroad experience from various contexts have found that these students are most likely to encounter some adaptation problems, such as homesickness, a lack of a sense of belonging, and an inability to integrate into local groups (Fang & Baker, 2018; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Holmes et al., 2015; Yu & Wright, 2016). As Kim (2017) indicated, "many of the habitual behaviors useful in the old setting may prove ineffectual in the new setting" when people move to and live in new environments. International students who study abroad also need to adapt to a wide range of academic and sociocultural challenges to

adapt to their new environment. Therefore, the identification of these problems also suggests that more research is needed to study the situation of international students' cross-cultural adaptation (Li & Ma, 2018; Yu & Wright, 2016; Zaykovskaya et al., 2017).

One of the key aims in the internationalization of higher education is to incorporate an intercultural dimension into the learning experience (Knight, 2008; Simm & Marvell, 2017) because "through the educational programs we create, we intend to prepare students to participate as global citizens" (Coelen, 2015). Intercultural learning prior to studying abroad plays a key role in students' intercultural encounters. In the last two decades, many students have chosen to study abroad at international universities where English is the dominant language of instruction. Most international higher education students studying abroad are Chinese. According to the latest data released by the Ministry of Education of China, 660,000 Chinese students studied abroad in 2018. In China, the international mobility of students in higher education is promoted and supported by national policies to foster talent, increase academic communication among colleges and universities, and address students' individual needs for personal development (Fang & Baker, 2018; Huang & Turner, 2018; Yu & Wright, 2016). Therefore, Chinese students studying in foreign countries are important subjects from whom researchers can gain insights into the cross-cultural adaptation experience of international students.

An increasing number of studies have been conducted to investigate and explore some key issues related to international students' cross-cultural adaptation, such as the strategies they use to deal with cross-cultural adaptation problems and the factors influencing their adaptation (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Shafaei & Razak, 2016; Wang, 2009; Yu & Wright, 2016). The outcome of international students' cross-cultural adaptation is relevant to not only the period in which they are experiencing the adaptation process but also the period before they study abroad. Many scholars have confirmed that international students can enhance their cross-cultural adaptation experience by preparing for it during the pre-departure period (Jackson, 2008, 2013; Kim, 2001; Otten, 2003). For example, as Jackson (2013) suggested, well-prepared international students can have more successful intercultural interactions and can mediate between different cultures more efficiently than those who are not prepared. Therefore, the pre-departure period is crucial because it can contribute to how well international students are prepared for their future cross-cultural adaptation.

However, while engaging in adequate preparations before departure is frequently suggested by studies concerning international students' cross-cultural adaptation, how these students maximize the pre-departure period is rarely examined. Thus, this paper investigates the general situation of how Chinese students prepare for an intercultural learning experience before they go abroad, the effects of prior intercultural learning on

their cross-cultural adaptation, and their perceptions of such adaptation. This work aims to offer valuable insights into how prior intercultural learning positively impacts their cross-cultural adaptation. Studying these issues will allow the stakeholders involved in facilitating student mobility to understand how to improve students' study abroad experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-cultural Adaptation

According to Kim (2001, 2017), cross-cultural adaptation refers to people's attempt to build and sustain a comparatively constant, correlative, and functional relationship with an alien social and cultural milieu. One may encounter various difficulties in trying to adapt to a socially and culturally new environment. This kind of cross-cultural adaptation has two main forms: 1) "psychological adaptation", namely, individuals' "psychological well-being or emotional satisfaction", and 2) "sociocultural adaptation", which means "the ability to fit in, to acquire culturally appropriate skills and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment" (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Students may often experience culture shock and acculturation challenges, while long-term sojourners may even experience "an identity transformation, a subtle and largely unconscious shift from a largely monocultural to an increasingly intercultural self-other orientation" (Kim, 2017). Traditionally, cross-cultural adaptation is investigated to understand how people deal with linguistic and cultural

issues when moving from one culture to another culture (Jackson, 2018; Kim, 2017; Lewthwaite, 1996). For instance, previous research has categorized various groups of people when investigating cross-cultural adaptation, namely, short-term travelers, sojourners, and immigrants. Cross-cultural adaptation may involve affective, social, behavioral, and cognitive aspects and should thus be regarded as a complex and dynamic process (Baker, 2015; Kim, 2017; Zhou et al., 2008). This paper views cross-cultural adaptation as a complex process by which sojourners adjust when living in a new culture that leads to a new repertoire of attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that help them become more global, multilingual, and multicultural (Kim, 2001, 2017; Zhou et al., 2008). Therefore, it is important to explore and unpack the psychological and sociocultural adaptation of international students studying abroad to provide a better picture for intercultural teaching and learning prior to and during the students' study abroad experience. As argued, a dynamic model of understanding cross-cultural adaptation is "based on wider social, psychological and educational theories, and regards the traveler as an active agent rather than the victim of pathology" (Zhou et al., 2008).

Current studies concerning the cross-cultural adaptation of international students mainly focus on two groups: students from different countries studying in one particular foreign country (Lewthwaite, 1996; Mori, 2000; Shafaei & Razak, 2016) and students

from one country studying in a foreign country (Brisset et al., 2010; Fang & Baker, 2018; Huang & Turner, 2018). As mentioned above, the factors influencing students' cross-cultural adaptation are a common research topic. These factors can be broadly divided into two categories: 1) external factors (related to the host environment), such as how much pressure people feel the host environment places on them and whether people from the host environment are friendly to foreigners, and 2) internal factors (related to an individual's personal circumstances), such as personality traits and language proficiency (Kim, 2001, 2017; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Zhou et al., 2008).

Current studies focusing on Chinese students studying overseas mostly explore the common patterns of their cross-cultural adaptation, the difficulties they encounter during the process, the strategies they use to resolve adaptation difficulties, or the factors influencing their adaptation; then, researchers offer advice derived from analyses of students' adaptation experience (Fang & Baker, 2018; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Henze & Zhu, 2012; Huang & Turner, 2018; Yu & Wright, 2016). While previous works have extensively researched how Chinese students studying overseas can improve their cross-cultural adaptation, most elaborate on what students can do after they are in the foreign countries instead of what they can do to improve their preparation in the pre-departure period. The latter topic is the focus of this research.

Prior Intercultural Learning and Cross-cultural Adaptation

Focusing on the period prior to Chinese students' departure for studying abroad, this study investigated the relevant factors that had an impact during this preparation period, which could be summarized as prior intercultural learning. This paper views culture from a poststructuralist approach and conceptualizes it as "a complex social system, as opposed to a natural system, that emerges through individuals' joint participation in the world giving rise to sets of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and practices" (Baker, 2015). As argued by Liu and Fang (2017), "culture should not be perceived merely as a cognitive concept, but, rather, from a critical perspective that challenges an essentialist set of cultural meanings."

From a poststructuralist perspective, it is also difficult to define intercultural learning; it can be regarded as a goal, a process, or even a special type of communication (Baker, 2015; McConachy, 2018; O'Dowd, 2003). To survey the factors contributing to cross-cultural adaptation, this paper considers intercultural learning to be a learning process (Baker, 2015; Byram, 1997, 2008). Specifically, intercultural learning denotes the process of individual learning and is defined as "acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one's own, and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange" (Bennett, 2009). Thus, the concepts of intercultural learning and

cross-cultural adaptation can be explored in different cultural contexts, and the outcomes can be applied to other cultural contexts (Bennett, 2009). In this case, intercultural learning can be viewed as the process or the outcome of improving one's intercultural competence, which covers the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable individuals to manage appropriate and effective interactions with people from other cultures (Deardorff, 2009). From this perspective, effective prior intercultural learning may lead to successful cross-cultural adaptation, as pre-departure intercultural learning is likely to prepare students for their future adaptation process (Jackson, 2018; Reid & Garson, 2017; Tian & Lu, 2018).

However, while prior preparation for cross-cultural adaptation is widely considered to be significant, few studies have investigated international Chinese students in the pre-departure period. In particular, Liu (2008) used a four-item questionnaire only to examine Chinese students' intercultural adaptation experience when studying abroad and to measure their prior preparedness. Liu defined prior preparedness as students' prior intercultural experience and how they prepared for their target language and culture. The study suggested that well-prepared students tended to choose assimilation and integration strategies. In Baker and Fang's (2019) study, which emphasized and investigated Chinese student sojourners' intercultural preparation in formal classroom settings, the participants were asked to evaluate their preparation in terms of whether taking English courses

equipped them with the skills they needed to succeed in their study abroad experience; most of the participants denied that their English language learning experience prepared them well for studying abroad. In general, only a few studies have explored international Chinese students' attitudes towards prior intercultural learning, and the extent to which their prior intercultural learning influences their adaptation in foreign countries.

Nevertheless, students may have different perceptions of prior intercultural learning and various ways of conducting it. Moreover, the actual effects of prior intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation remain to be studied. Therefore, to explore the prior intercultural learning of Chinese students studying abroad and its impact on their cross-cultural adaptation, this study attempts to address three research questions.

Q1: How do international Chinese students engage in intercultural learning before studying abroad?

Q2: To what extent does prior intercultural learning influence their on-site cross-cultural adaptation?

Q3: What is Chinese university students' perception of prior intercultural learning?

METHODS

Participants

Twelve Chinese university students who had experience studying abroad participated in this research (Table 1). All of them had taken part in a semester-long exchange study abroad program in the fourth year of their undergraduate program during the 2018-2019 academic year. The participants studied in Canada, Ireland, the UK, and the US.

Table 1
Profile of the participants

Participants	Major	Gender	Foreign country where studied	Length of stay (months)
S1	Law	Female	US	3
S2	English	Male	Ireland	6
S3	Management	Female	Canada	4
S4	Finance	Female	UK	4
S5	Management	Male	Canada	5
S6	English	Female	Ireland	4
S7	English	Male	US	6
S8	Physics	Female	Ireland	4
S9	English	Female	US	6
S10	Finance	Female	Ireland	6
S11	Accounting	Female	Canada	4
S12	English	Female	Ireland	5

Research Instruments

In addressing the research questions, this study employed qualitative approaches to investigate Chinese students' firsthand accounts of their study abroad experience. This research collected data from two periods of time: the participants' prior intercultural learning experience in the pre-departure period and their cross-cultural adaptation experience during their study abroad. Interviews and written narratives were adopted for data collection. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they could enhance researchers' flexibility during interviews while following the interview prompt to explore in-depth and unexpected areas (Richards, 2003). Following the interview prompts, the researchers were able to ask follow-up questions and ensure more flexible discussions based on what the participants had expressed (Galletta, 2013). Being interpretive, interviews were useful for understanding the participants' cross-cultural adaptation to "view knowledge as socially constructed through language and interaction, and reality as connected and known through society's cultural and ideological categories" (Tracy, 2013). Employing interviews to collect qualitative data could help the researchers collect in-depth, retrospective data and offer significant insights into international Chinese students' understanding of their prior intercultural learning process and the quality of their cross-cultural adaptation experience, thereby exploring not only "what" the participants said but also "how" they said it (Kvale, 2007). Furthermore,

written narratives enabled the participants to reflect on their study abroad experience to further develop their critical thinking skills and reflect on their thoughts regarding their participation in this study (Lin et al., 2014).

Data Collection

To obtain details of the participants' prior intercultural learning experience, the researchers conducted individual semi-structured online interviews with each participant. After the participating students went abroad and had studied for about one month, they were required to write an introspective narrative following provided guidelines about their prior intercultural learning experience. The narratives were written in Chinese and saved as Word documents for further analysis. One month after their return to China, each student was asked to participate in another round of semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, they commented on the role of their prior intercultural learning in their cross-cultural adaptation. The interview, which consisted of five questions, was divided into three main parts (see Appendix). Each interview lasted around 30 – 40 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin in order to allow the participants to flexibly express their ideas in their native language (Mann, 2011). The interviews were transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, the researchers took notes of the participants' main ideas; after that, each recording was reviewed, while key

and recurring ideas related to the research questions were identified. Relevant extracts were then translated into English.

Data Analysis

Latent content analysis was adopted for key themes related to the research aims and the issues that emerged in this study (Dörnyei, 2007; Schreier, 2012). Latent content analysis enables researchers “to explore the deeper meanings so as to add interpretive depth and breadth to the analysis” (Jenkins, 2014) through an interactive discourse. First, all the data were input into the software NVivo 11 for coding purposes. After the transcription process, the researchers read the transcripts obtained from NVivo and listened to the recordings to develop possible themes for analysis. The common aspects of prior intercultural learning that the participants focused on were also summarized. For the interviews, each participant’s answers were summarized and restructured according to the research questions; recurring ideas and valuable or exceptional thoughts were noted. The narratives and interview records of each participant were reviewed and compared to see how prior intercultural learning affected their subsequent cross-cultural adaptation. After listening to the recordings again and rereading and annotating the transcripts, the researchers chose the following main themes to exemplify the participants’ experience: the international Chinese students’ prior

intercultural learning situation, the effects of prior intercultural learning on their cross-cultural adaptation, and the participants’ perceptions of prior intercultural learning.

Validity and Reliability

The authors fully understand that findings from such a small sample size cannot be generalized, given that China has the largest number of international students studying abroad (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014). However, the participants’ prior intercultural learning experience and reflections on their study abroad may be transferrable to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As this is a qualitative study, the researchers recognize the degree of subjectivity in the data collection process and interpretation of findings. Nevertheless, the interview questions and the written narrative prompts were carefully worded. The authors also established rapport with the interviewees. Finally, the transcripts were sent to the interviewees for peer-checking to ensure the accuracy of the transcription and translation processes from the researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the participants’ narratives and interviews, and the discussion of the data are presented in terms of the three main issues associated with the three research questions.

1. International Chinese students’ prior intercultural learning situation

2. Effects of prior intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation

3. Participants' perceptions of prior intercultural learning

The International Chinese Students' Prior Intercultural Learning Situation

In general, the data of all the participants indicated that, to different degrees, they had all engaged in prior intercultural learning for their later cross-cultural adaptation, and they had various ways of engaging in intercultural learning. In terms of the content of their prior intercultural learning, they did not emphasize one specific culture; rather, they focused on the transferable knowledge and skills needed to interact with people from different cultures. For instance, S2 stated, "I searched online to understand some etiquette in order to communicate with people from other lingua-cultures" (written narrative). S7 mentioned, "I reflected on an intercultural communication course I took in my university. I tried to use some of the knowledge I gained to prepare for intercultural communication abroad" (interview).

Among the participants, the most common way of engaging in prior intercultural learning was searching for information online and seeking advice from students who had a study abroad experience. All of the participants searched online for information using popular websites or social platforms, such as Baidu, Zhihu, and

WeChat¹, because this is one of the easiest and fastest ways to gain information.

Extract 1

I searched Zhihu to learn the culture of Ireland and YouTube to learn about its food. I also watched a BBC documentary to understand life in the country. Online information really helped me prior to my study abroad experience in Ireland because I gained not only basic cultural knowledge but also certain cultural values (S2, written narrative).

In addition to searching for information online, all the participants asked their senior schoolmates who had studied abroad for related information. Some (S2, S3, S5, S9, and S12) even directly asked foreign friends for related information.

Extract 2

I added the WeChat account of a classmate who recently returned from the US. We discussed some taboos and cultural norms. I benefited from learning about her experience as she gave me some suggestions before my trip to the US. I was initially nervous, but after hearing from her, I became more confident before my trip abroad (S9, interview).

¹ These are popular search engines and social networks in China.

Furthermore, all of the participants had previously attended at least one course or lecture about intercultural communication. Such courses/lectures were either provided by their home universities or attended by the participants as a personal initiative.

Extract 3

I attended a course on intercultural communication at my university before going to Canada. I learned some basic communication skills and foreign customs. I didn't experience too much culture shock when I first visited Canada (S5, written narrative).

S2 attended a short training course during her spare time, as mentioned in the following extract. However, he also pointed out the limitation of his training experience relative to the real experience abroad.

Extract 4

I participated in a training course on Irish culture presented by a teacher who had experience in Ireland. The course was helpful in my preparation abroad. However, one thing that I didn't learn from the course, but did from my actual experience, was the "drinking" culture. You can only experience the typical "drinking" culture when you are in Ireland (S2, interview).

Two participants (S3 and S6) watched foreign TV series or national TV programs about foreign culture. One participant (S11) also borrowed books from her university

library and watched several documentaries about the country in which she was going to study. Two participants (S10 and S12) who studied in Ireland obtained information from an informative Internet application that provided a wide range of information about Ireland.

Regarding the prior intercultural learning content, the participants focused on practical information that would directly affect their cross-cultural adaptation. Some intercultural knowledge and skills were obtained but not emphasized by most of the participants. For example, they preferred to gain information such as the modes of transportation, accommodations, and cuisines of their destination countries. Given their status as students, some of the participants (S1, S4, S5, S7, S9, and S10) also inquired about the educational systems, teaching methods, and campus life at the universities they would be attending in their destination countries.

Extract 5

I am worried about my academic listening and writing skills, so I searched for information about the UK educational system and listened to BBC before studying abroad (S4, interview).

Some students (S2, S11, and S12) wanted to know the social values of the host cultures and the nature of the local people of their host countries. S11 was worried about life with a host family but felt a sense of home after meeting them abroad.

Extract 6

I was worried before going abroad because that would be my first time living with a host family. Upon my arrival, my host family gave me a warm welcome. I learned to get along well with my family, and I felt a sense of home after living with them for four months. I think that living with a host family enables one to experience the culture better when living and studying abroad (S11, interview).

In addition, all of the participants acquired intercultural knowledge from the classes they took, including information about culture shock, stereotyping, and non-verbal behaviors, which might have contributed to their understanding of the actual communication that occurs among people of different cultures. Regarding these courses, three participants (S3, S5, and S9) believed they acquired some intercultural communication skills. However, the majority noted that they did not learn much because their courses failed to provide them with systematic and detailed intercultural knowledge and corresponding activities for practicing what they had learned.

Extract 7

The course I attended at my university was too general and broad. The contents were not relevant to what I expected. I am not really interested in the history of a country (S8, written narrative).

In terms of skills and knowledge about the English language, five of the

12 participants (S3, S5, S7, S9, and S12) kept improving their English listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities so they could study and live in foreign countries in the future. Part of their reason was the belief that doing so would facilitate their communication in English with native English speakers. Finally, one participant (S11) tried to learn about the history of her host country. She stated, "I tried to learn Canadian history before going there." She believed it would help her better understand the people living there and facilitate her communication with them. This contradicted what S8 noted, as mentioned above.

In summary, these participants' narratives about the details of their prior intercultural learning suggest that they commonly paid attention to preparing for their study abroad experience before their departure. Even though each of them engaged in prior intercultural learning opportunities to varying degrees, they prioritized the learning of practical information needed for intercultural communication and daily life, mostly because it would have a direct effect on their sociocultural adaptation. However, many of the participants did not broadly emphasize or elaborate on the intercultural knowledge aspect of intercultural learning, such as the theories and concepts associated with intercultural communication, even though most of them attended courses on intercultural communication. This might be due to differences in the courses they attended, their personal receptivity to what was being taught, and how they applied what they learned.

The Effects of Prior Intercultural Learning on Cross-cultural Adaptation

When asked about whether prior intercultural learning influenced their cross-cultural adaptation, all of the participants acknowledged its theoretical importance in helping them adjust to new environments. However, when considering the actual situations of their cross-cultural adaptation, they admitted that the influence of prior intercultural learning was very limited.

In terms of the usefulness of prior intercultural learning, all the participants expressed that they benefited from different aspects of it during their cross-cultural adaptation. Below, S6 recounted how the intercultural knowledge she acquired from a course at her home university before studying abroad helped her understand foreigners' behaviors in her daily life in her host country.

Extract 8

I attended ELC3², whose main focus is intercultural communication. The textbook of this course provides lots of examples of intercultural knowledge. We learned some theories, such as insider and outsider theories. We learned about foreigners' ideas about eye contact, body language, and some other non-verbal behaviors. During my time in Ireland, I sometimes had experiences related to the knowledge I

2 ELC3 is a mandatory English language course at this university.

gained, like the distance between two people and the duration of eye contact with others (S1, interview).

In the following example, S1 mentions that prior intercultural learning can also affect students' attitudes towards people from other countries.

Extract 9

I attended one course about a comparative study of Eastern and Western cultures. Because of that course, I developed the awareness that what a typical Western person will think when I communicate with them does not need to be considered. Thus, I think it is not necessary to know what countries the foreign people I encounter come from. When getting along with them, I prefer to know what kind of people they really are, or their personalities, instead of assuming what they will be like if they are from certain countries...I think I have become more tolerant and less judgmental due to that course (S1, interview).

The responses of these two participants also supported the findings of previous studies that emphasized the importance of using the pre-departure period to develop intercultural awareness (Fang & Baker, 2018; Halenko & Jones, 2017; Jackson, 2008, 2018). Nevertheless, when the participants reflected on their cross-cultural adaptation experience, all of them admitted that they encountered various sociocultural and psychological adaptation problems for a

period of time. The issues they encountered mainly included understanding the local vernacular, getting along with the locals, transitioning to the local cuisines, and homesickness. This indicates that they experienced various instances of culture shock but learned to adapt to their new environment (Zhou et al., 2008). About the possible reasons for having these problems, eight of the 12 participants (S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S11, and S12) mentioned that they disregarded these problems before they went abroad, partly because they did not attach much importance to these problems or expect to encounter them. As S2 mentioned, people may sometimes overestimate the status of their prior intercultural learning.

Extract 10

I was not satisfied with my cross-cultural adaptation there... because I neglected some adaptation problems, like my homesickness and the different diet there, which really affected my normal life there... I had searched for information about the food there before, and I had traveled to many places before... so I thought I would not have psychological adaptation problems and could deal with those differences easily (S2, interview).

This also confirms that the students were likely to have exaggerated judgments of their intercultural preparation and thus failed to minimize the chances of encountering problems in foreign countries (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004). Thus, the effects of their prior intercultural learning were

limited; the students failed to anticipate all the difficulties they may encounter during their study abroad experience, and they were likely completely unprepared or insufficiently prepared.

The Participants' Perceptions of Prior Intercultural Learning

Despite the limited effect of their prior intercultural learning, all the participants agreed that it was necessary to engage in intercultural learning before one's departure. However, they had different opinions on how it influenced their cross-cultural adaptation.

First, all of the participants recognized the necessity of prior intercultural learning, mostly because it at least helped them prepare psychologically. They all believed that prior intercultural learning might have lessened their chances of encountering insolvable adaptation problems. As much as possible, it helped them avoid most unexpected problems. With this realization, the participants had positive attitudes towards the cross-cultural adaptation process, which helped them properly address related challenges.

As discussed above, unexpected adaptation difficulties also arose despite the prior intercultural learning acquired by the participants and regardless of the degree of success. Nine of the participants (S1, S2, S3, S4, S6, S7, S8, S10, and S11) also remarked that it was impossible to exhaustively pursue prior intercultural learning. In other words, they agreed that cross-cultural adaptation difficulties are

unavoidable, and prior intercultural learning cannot solve all the challenges that arise in the adaptation process.

A common idea emerged regarding the effects of prior intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation: only by practicing what they learned during their prior intercultural learning could they maximize such learning for cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, without practice, prior intercultural learning will not be considerably helpful. Similar ideas can be seen in the following examples from the participants.

Extract 11

I think some knowledge and skills, such as those related to language, lifestyles, festivals, and customs, are understood better in practice. Sometimes, you cannot learn how to swim by standing on the shore. The local cultural atmosphere and language environment matter a lot in the understanding of theoretical knowledge (S7, written narrative).

Extract 12

The differences among various cultures are displayed more in the trivial things in daily life. Information learned from others cannot cover all the knowledge you may need. Only in practice can we experience more differences... Therefore, it is important to remind yourself not to jump to conclusions when interacting with people from other cultures (S8, interview).

Both S7 and S8 emphasized that practice and experience played important roles in cross-cultural adaptation because various intricate factors might influence the actual adaptation process. S9 believed that cross-cultural adaptation was merely a process of intercultural learning and that encountering problems at this stage was perfectly normal. She also mentioned that the flexibility to deal with problems was vital. According to her, it takes time to develop this ability to react to different settings, which is also impacted by the effectiveness of students' prior intercultural learning.

Therefore, all the participants regarded prior intercultural learning as necessary, even though different factors impact cross-cultural adaptation. The phrase "Something is better than nothing" can be used to describe the participants' perceived effect of prior intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation. More importantly, practice, which is defined in this context as using what is learned and engaging in intercultural interactions, was considered a key factor in whether or not prior intercultural learning can influence cross-cultural adaptation.

IMPLICATIONS

This study's findings provide valuable implications for both Chinese students studying abroad and the other stakeholders facilitating these students' cross-cultural adaptation experience overseas. This study contributes to the growing body of research calling for more attention on improving international students' study abroad experience and studies on intercultural

education in general (Bennett, 2009; Fang & Baker, 2018; Jackson, 2013, 2018). It is important that Chinese students studying abroad and other stakeholders recognize the significance of prior intercultural learning in cross-cultural adaptation.

Chinese university students who will study abroad should avoid overestimating their preparation in the pre-departure period and instead maximize this time. This study's findings suggest that these students tend to be less prepared than they think they are in the pre-departure period. In terms of specific ways of conducting prior intercultural learning for successful cross-cultural adaptation, students should focus on gaining more intercultural knowledge and skills. Because it takes time for students to accumulate and practice knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to intercultural communication, they must take the initiative to learn them before they study abroad. Moreover, they should continue to practice basic language skills before and during the study abroad period because these skills are fundamental to effective intercultural communication.

While fundamental and practical information about the destination countries is also essential for these students' successful adaptation, they can obtain this information through various reliable ways, such as consulting people who have a study abroad experience and using related media resources. Moreover, it is vital for them to have tolerant and open attitudes towards other cultures when

dealing with cultural differences to facilitate mutual understanding in intercultural communication. This will also help them adapt to their situation and adjust to new environments when they encounter culture shock abroad.

To supplement students' efforts, universities can offer relevant assistance to facilitate prior intercultural learning. Providing courses about intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes is the most common and profound way to accomplish this goal. Baker and Fang (2019) mentioned that Chinese students primarily prepared for their study abroad through classroom learning. Thus, universities can provide more thorough and systematic intercultural courses, which should provide more opportunities for students to practice what they learn instead of merely discussing ideas and theories about intercultural communication. Furthermore, it will help ensure that these courses include international students who are studying at these universities, given that this will allow students from different cultural backgrounds to exchange ideas easily.

In addition to offering intercultural courses, universities can invite study abroad returnees to hold sharing sessions about their life abroad. These students will be able to share firsthand information and ideas about how to adapt to other cultures from Chinese students' perspective. Another possible method is inviting professors from other cultural backgrounds to present lectures on intercultural phenomena and encourage

international students to participate in local campus activities with Chinese students. This will help not only those who plan to study abroad but also those hoping to expand their intercultural competence. The primary purpose of these methods should be to increase students' direct and frequent exposure to and interactions with other cultures or people from other countries.

CONCLUSION

Before conclusions are drawn, the limitations of this study should be discussed. First, due to the time constraint and the limited availability of students with relevant study abroad experience, the number of participants in this study is relatively small (12). Moreover, the participants' educational background in the university period is not diverse enough, and the participants studied in four foreign countries only. Therefore, the research findings may not be generalizable to all Chinese students studying abroad. Second, although this study employed qualitative methods to provide an in-depth understanding of the students' prior intercultural learning and cross-cultural adaptation experience, it should be noted that the participants' recollections may not be complete or totally accurate, as they relied on their memory and their ability to relate the details (Jackson, 2013). Third, while many factors jointly affect students' cross-cultural adaptation experience, this study focused on prior intercultural learning only. It did not investigate the effects of the other factors because of the complexity of

the study abroad experience. In spite of these limitations, the authors believe that this study's findings can reflect similar settings.

In conclusion, this study investigated the general situation of how Chinese university students studying abroad experience intercultural learning in the pre-departure period, and it examined the effects of prior intercultural learning on their cross-cultural adaptation. Based on the participants' reflections on their experience in the periods preceding and during the time they studied abroad, this work also explored Chinese university students' perceptions of prior intercultural learning and its impact on cross-cultural adaptation. Thus, this study offers some suggestions on how to facilitate prior intercultural learning. The research findings call for added attention to prior intercultural learning, a vital factor contributing to students' cross-cultural adaptation. Prior intercultural learning is helpful and necessary for students' successful cross-cultural adaptation; however, on its own, such learning does not guarantee success. Prior intercultural learning can positively impact students' adaptation process only if the acquired skills, knowledge, and attitudes are put into practice. Chinese university students who plan to study abroad will commonly engage in prior intercultural learning in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, this research study's findings will provide them with more inspiration in terms of how to effectively accomplish that goal, thus helping them maximize the pre-departure period for future cross-cultural adaptation. Moreover, the

research results provide other practitioners involved in facilitating Chinese university students' study abroad experience, including educators and other staff members at educational institutions, with insights into approaches they can utilize to optimize the prior intercultural learning and enhance the cross-cultural adaptation of their prospective study abroad students.

For future research, more participants with diverse academic backgrounds and study abroad experience can be included to broaden the applicability of the research implications for students. Moreover, future research can adopt both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate students' study abroad experience using diverse data. Concerning the research value of the preparation period in international students' study abroad experience, more longitudinal research can also be conducted to compare the pre-departure and study abroad periods and to explore the changes or long-term effects of some factor(s), such as changes in the students' intercultural competence before and after studying abroad or the effects of students' intercultural attitudes on their study abroad experience.

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APPENDIX

Appendix Semi-structured Interview Prompts

1. Influence of Prior Intercultural Learning on Cross-cultural Adaptation

- 1) What do you think of your cross-cultural adaptation when you studied abroad?
- 2) Did you encounter any adaptation problems during this process? Please give at least one example of how you solved these problems.

2. Perceptions of and Attitudes towards Cross-cultural Adaptation and Intercultural Learning

- 3) Generally speaking, do you think your prior intercultural learning affected your cross-cultural adaptation?
- 4) What is your understanding of intercultural learning and prior intercultural learning?

3. Reflections/Suggestions for Improving Prior Intercultural Learning

- 5) How would you suggest that individuals who are going to study abroad participate in intercultural learning in the pre-departure period?

