



LEARNING INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS AND TRADE IN A TRANSNATIONAL PROGRAM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This phenomenological study delves into the learning experiences of Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in a transnational International Economics and Trade program, which is collaboratively run by Chinese and Australian universities. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 23 students from various years of study, the research aims to uncover how these students navigate and derive meaning from their experiences within a cross-cultural educational setting. Data analysis reveals three prominent themes: the differences in course design for state-planned versus non-state-planned students, the challenges posed by intensive academic demands and diverse assessment methods, and the necessity of adapting to distinct teaching methodologies prevalent in the two educational systems. The findings underscore the urgent need for improved administrative coordination, enhanced collaboration among Chinese and Australian teaching staff, and better preparation for students entering transnational programs. This study significantly contributes to the understanding of the complexities inherent in cross-border higher education, providing valuable insights that can inform strategies to enhance teaching quality and enrich student experiences in similar international programs.

Keywords: Transitional program; Chinese undergraduates; Learning experience; Cross-cultural educational environment; Phenomenology

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1 INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education is an ongoing process that incorporates cross-cultural and global factors into the goals and operations of universities (Knight, 2003). In the field of higher education in China, internationalization is embodied in various forms and strategies, which are prominently reflected in the mobility of students and scholars, academic cooperation, and collaborative research projects (Huang, 2007). A key aspect of this process is the integration of international partnerships and educational models that bridge diverse educational systems, which are essential for enhancing the global competitiveness of Chinese universities.

In China, TNHE is widely called Chinese Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS) (Hou et al., 2014). CFCRS encompasses joint institutions and programs (Yang, 2014) and plays a pivotal role in the internationalization of Chinese universities (Huang, 2007). The CFCRS program, also known as Zhongwai Hezuo Banxue Xiangmu, represents collaborative ventures between local Chinese universities and foreign or overseas higher education institutions aimed exclusively at educating Chinese students (Hou et al., 2014). These partnerships also facilitate the exchange of best practices in management, teaching methodologies, and technology integration, which are crucial for adapting to the demands of the global educational landscape. For the convenience of international readers, the term 'transnational programs' is used throughout this paper instead of 'CFCRS programs', although these terms are interchangeable within the context of Chinese higher education.

These programs employ teaching staff from both foreign partner universities and Chinese institutions, offering courses that combine language learning with specialized subject instruction in a foreign language. Key educational resources, such as curricula, instructional outlines, textbooks, and teaching technologies, are sourced from partner foreign universities. The diverse teaching and learning methods include group discussions, presentations, role-plays, and business simulation games. Additionally, foreign partner universities' assessment methods have been incorporated to enrich the traditionally exam-focused Chinese evaluation system. This blend of

resources and methodologies creates a cross-cultural educational environment. Such collaborations also serve as a model for innovative educational practices, contributing to the transformation of educational management in China.

While many studies have been conducted on different aspects of TNHE in China, including its historical development, policy framework, and challenges (Huang, 2008; Wang, 2016; Yang, 2008), studies that have specifically concentrated on Chinese students' actual learning experiences in cross-system educational settings remain very limited (Qin & Te, 2016). As Dai, Lingard, and Musofer (2019) point out, learning in the CFCRS means learning between two education systems (Chinese system vs. foreign system) and the disparities between educational systems can be double-edged - they might serve as valuable learning experiences, but could also pose adjustment difficulties for students (Dai, Matthews & Renshawc 2019). According to Cook-Sather (2006), students' voices are essential for educators and institutions aiming to gain insight into the realities of specific educational programs and environments. In the context of global education systems, understanding the lived experiences of students within transnational programs is crucial for improving the management and quality of these transnational collaborations. Dai and Garcia (2019) further argue that understanding students' authentic learning experiences helps to examine the quality of TNHE from a micro perspective. Therefore, this research aims to enrich the body of knowledge by exploring the students' lived experiences of learning in a transnational program jointly run by a Chinese university and an Australian university.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research setting and participants

The transnational program of interest for this study is an International Economics and Trade (IET) program, jointly developed by a Chinese university and an Australian university in 2004 and later accredited by the Chinese MOE (Ministry of Education). Extensive educational resources provided by the Australian partner university were integrated into the transnational program at the Chinese higher education institution,

encompassing the curriculum, instructional frameworks, teaching materials (such as textbooks), pedagogical methodologies, and academic personnel.

Students completing the IET program are required to develop comprehensive skills in economic theory, analytical thinking, and global financial concepts. The curriculum emphasizes proficiency in English across all communication modes, along with a strong mathematical and statistical foundation. Graduates must demonstrate expertise in market analysis, business administration, and quantitative research methods. The program also emphasizes personal qualities such as flexibility, collaborative skills, creative thinking, and ethical awareness.

The curriculum combines diverse business-related subjects, delivered through a unique bilateral teaching approach. While some courses are conducted by Chinese faculty members, many are jointly taught by Chinese and Australian instructors in both languages. Additionally, certain language-focused courses are exclusively led by international faculty. Students face significant academic demands, including adapting to Australian teaching methods and improving their English proficiency early in the program. The intensive curriculum requires students to complete approximately 200 credits over four years, often resulting in extended daily schedules from morning until evening.

The research participant selection followed specific guidelines. Eligible students needed to be transnational IET program learners with experience in internationally-taught courses. The study aimed to include students from all year levels while maintaining gender balance. The final participant group comprised 23 students (7 males, 16 females) distributed across different academic years: 8 first-year, 11 second-year, 2 third-year, and 2 fourth-year students. This sample size aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidelines for phenomenological research, which suggest that 1-30 participants are appropriate.

Before the start of the interview, all participants were informed about the overall objectives of the research and their rights related to the interview process. Each participant completed a student information sheet that collected personal details such as age, gender, year of study, and major

courses. It is important to note that all participants, regardless of whether they were first-year or fourth-year students, were enrolled in the Chinese university exclusively to pursue the transnational program. This program is essentially a '4+0' model, where the number before the '+' indicates the years spent at local Chinese universities, and the number after the '+' represents the years spent at partner universities abroad.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

Phenomenology is particularly well-suited for understanding the subjective, lived experiences of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Van Manen (1990) identified phenomenology as the study of the essence of experiences, which can be best understood in detail within a context. The present research concerns a group of undergraduates' lived learning experience in a transnational IET program, making it ideal for a phenomenological approach. Moreover, transnational programs are complex, multilevel learning experiences determined by institutional, cultural, and personal factors. Phenomenology allows the researcher to delve deeply into participants' perspectives, uncovering nuances that might otherwise have gone undetected when using other research approaches. Furthermore, the phenomenological method has been working well in exploring learning and adaptation in transnational contexts, as existing phenomenological studies have revealed subtle processes such as skill acquisition, acculturation, and self-development (Ruddock & Turner, 2007). We, therefore, believed that applying phenomenology would help us gain in-depth insight into the way students of transnational programs constructed meaning from their academic and cultural experiences and offer a deeper understanding of their learning journey in a cross-cultural environment.

This research adopted the interpretive phenomenological approach since interpretive phenomenology fundamentally focuses on the process of meaning-making, which helps the researchers uncover how students made sense of their experiences in this transnational program. The way that students interpret their experiences and give meaning to these experiences is of great concern since it can strongly influence their learning outcomes and satisfaction with the

program. Realizing that the aim of this study is not to reveal the essence of learning in a transnational program (Moustakas, 1994), we abandoned transcendental phenomenology in favor of interpretive phenomenology.

We employed semi-structured interviews as the primary means to collect data. The main interview questions included: Can you describe specific moments or activities that were particularly memorable, impactful, or meaningful in your learning? What did these experiences mean to you? What did you learn from them? Meanwhile, we also collected textual materials such as student handbooks and teaching syllabi as supplementary materials. It was expected that the use of diverse data sources would help alleviate the limitations and biases associated with relying on a single method, thereby enhancing the credibility and robustness of the research and improving the validity and reliability of the findings (Patton, 1999).

In analyzing the data, we followed the procedures proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). We began by reading the transcripts multiple times and listening to the audio recordings to engage with the content and ensure a comprehensive understanding. Following this, an initial noting phase was completed where we produced detailed annotations, focusing on semantic content, language use, and explicit meanings that were conveyed by participants. Interpretative insights were also included to show how and why participants said what they did in the context of any emerging patterns of meaning. In the developing emergent themes phase, these annotations were used to generate concise themes that reflected key features of the participants' accounts. This involved the synthesis of descriptive comments with interpretative insights, with irrelevant data points being discarded to maintain focus on the research aims. Mapping of emergent themes was undertaken to explore relationships across these so that the emergent and super-ordinate themes were organized into a structured presentation for each participant. Data from each participant was analyzed separately. During this process, themes from prior cases were bracketed to allow each analysis to remain firmly embedded in the participant's distinctive account. Afterward, the themes were identified across cases by grouping

similar themes and identifying links between them. Finally, themes were further refined, named, and integrated into super-ordinate themes, which captured shared experiences while honoring individual nuances.

3 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The interpretive phenomenological analysis of the interview data led to the identification of three themes that reflect the Chinese undergraduates' learning experience in the transnational IET program.

3.1 Subtle differences in course design: state-planned vs. non-state-planned students

This study revealed two distinct categories of undergraduate enrollment: state-planned and non-state-planned students. According to Mok and Ong (2014), students who complete the Gao Kao (College Entrance Examination) and receive university placement through the national quota system are classified as state-planned students. In contrast, non-state-planned students encompass those who enter universities through alternative pathways, such as self-funded students or adult learners who did not gain admission through the traditional Gao Kao.

Based on an analysis of the student handbook and syllabi we collected, there were slight variations in the curricula that students were required to complete. Specifically, over the four years, state-planned undergraduates needed to complete 51 mandatory courses and 31 elective courses, while non-state-planned undergraduates were expected to take 44 mandatory courses and 22 electives. Among these courses, 22 differed between the two groups, indicating that state-planned and non-state-planned students shared the majority of their courses.

Examining the courses offered in this transnational IET program highlights the discipline's comprehensive nature. The curriculum draws extensively from various business-related fields and includes both 'hard' and 'soft' knowledge components. The 'hard' components typically involve technical aspects with universal rules, which Corder (1990) describes as subject-dependent, such as accounting. In contrast, the

'soft' components are more contextually dependent, reflecting environmental influences, as noted by Corder (1990), such as marketing.

3.2 Struggling to cope: course taking and exams

This transnational IET program mandates that undergraduates take courses hosted by both Chinese and Australian lecturers, which results in a demanding academic schedule. According to the student handbook, all Chinese students must earn approximately 200 credit points across various courses to fulfill both Chinese and Australian degree requirements. This intensive workload helps explain why students frequently mention feeling overwhelmed by the number of classes and academic pressure.

Another source of pressure comes from the exams and quizzes. Similar to what Dai and colleagues (2019; 2020) have found, both Chinese and Australian lecturers had their preferred way of examining. The Chinese teachers frequently assessed students based on a single final exam taken at the end of the semester. This closed-book exam remained a predominant and high-stakes method of evaluation. As S19 summarized: "Chinese teachers have large exams, with the university organizing the time and location, and everyone attends to take the exam." Such a finding is in line with Dai, Matthews, and Renshaw (2020) and Dai, Matthews, and Reyes (2019) who discovered that the main method of assessment in China centered on textbook examinations. S17 expressed dissatisfaction with this assessment approach:

I don't like the way Chinese teachers test, because it's so concentrated, and there are so many predetermined key points you have to memorize. You need to retain all that information, and then the following two weeks are especially exhausting.

This experience sharply contrasts with what Dai, Lingard, and Musofer (2019) and Dai, Matthews, and Reyes (2019) found in their studies, where Chinese participants felt it was easier and less pressured to pass exams in Chinese universities. While Dai, Matthews, and Renshaw (2020) did not further explore the reasons for the dominance of the textbook-focused exam, we found that it could

be attributed to the university's policy. The university mandated that certain courses, particularly required ones, must have a final closed-book exam. As S20 noted, "The university's regulations require that all mandatory courses hosted by Chinese lecturers have a final exam, and this exam must be closed book." This policy limits teachers' ability to adopt alternative assessment methods like those used in primary and secondary education for evaluating college students.

However, some Chinese lecturers have begun to adopt evaluation methods from Western countries, gradually transitioning toward a more process-oriented approach. This method prioritizes students' actual performance and engagement throughout the learning process, offering timely assessments of their learning quality, recognizing achievements, and identifying areas for improvement. S6 shared:

For example, in our class, one part of the grade is based on the final exam score, and the other part comes from regular assignments, such as homework, essays, and group discussions. Attendance also contributes to the regular grade. The final exam score is weighted, and then, both components are combined to determine the final grade.

This unique finding has seldom been made in prior studies (e.g. Dai, Matthews, & Reyes, 2019).

Australian lecturers prioritized ongoing assessment of academic performance throughout the learning process. As S1 observed, "The foreign teachers pay more attention to the regular grades and individual performance. We have exams now and then." Similarly, S10 remarked that Australian teachers "definitely emphasize the assessment during the regular classes, which is different from Chinese teachers." Furthermore, the assessment formats in Australian classrooms are notably diverse. S14 commented, "The foreign teachers have an exam every one-and-a-half month or so. Sometimes it is a speech, sometimes it is writing." These findings align with what Dai, Matthews, and Reyes (2019) revealed. While Dai, Matthews, and Reyes (2019) focus research on Chinese students who experience examinations at Australian universities, our study examines Chinese undergraduate students who undergo Australian-style examinations within the

transnational IET program in mainland China. In other words, the Chinese students in our research can engage with and experience the assessment methods of Australian higher education without the need to travel abroad.

Another distinguishing feature of Australian assessments is the use of clear scoring points, with evaluations following well-defined standards and criteria. For instance, S15 illustrated this with a recent exam, stating:

There are scoring points for content, as well as eye contact, body language, and being able to speak without notes during the speech. And then there is grammar, with different tenses and sentence structures.

Most interviewed students expressed satisfaction with the assessment methods used by Australian teachers. They highlighted the process-oriented nature of these assessments, which provided ongoing supervision and encouraged learners to focus on consistent effort and participation. S2 explained:

The foreign teacher's evaluation method provides ongoing monitoring. Regular exams mean you will not feel as stressed as you would in classes where the review only starts at the end of the term. They constantly remind you to study hard and take class seriously.

Other students, however, expressed that they did not favor the Australian way of assessment. S19 mentioned:

... for an exam like this with a foreign teacher, I must constantly prepare for it. I am very anxious, and the exam can only be taken in English, whether it is spoken, written, or performed.

This negative opinion contrasts with existing findings (e.g., Dai, Matthews, and Reyes, 2019), in which Chinese learners generally hold a positive view of the exam methods employed by foreign universities and tend to evaluate these methods quite favorably.

Within this transnational IET program, all students must undertake both Chinese and Australian curricula, resulting in a substantial assessment burden. The academic evaluation framework encompasses conventional Chinese assessment methodologies and novel Australian evaluation

protocols, collectively contributing to an intensified academic workload. Chinese learners consistently experience significant challenges in meeting these diverse assessment requirements. Moreover, these students must demonstrate considerable cognitive flexibility in alternating between Chinese and Western academic assessment paradigms to achieve satisfactory academic outcomes and maintain passing grades across all course components.

3.3 Facing different teaching: learning between the familiar and unfamiliar

All undergraduates in this transnational IET program were exposed to a diverse array of teaching styles and methodologies. While they were accustomed to the Chinese educational approach, the Australian pedagogical methods were unfamiliar to them. As a result, their learning experience was shaped by navigating the interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Most participants were impressed by the novel instructional approaches used by the Australian lecturers, such as cooperative learning, which represents an innovative pedagogical approach emphasizing mutual assistance among group members. This teaching method assigns clearly defined roles to participants, fostering collaboration to achieve a common goal. By engaging in cooperative learning, students are encouraged to balance their interests with the collective needs of the group (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). The Australian teaching staff adeptly employed this instructional strategy, with students demonstrating approval and enthusiasm for such activities. For instance, S19 vividly recalled a classroom activity:

Last semester, we had a debate between groups. Each group presented their respective arguments, followed by an inter-group debate conducted entirely in English. The highlight was a decisive group at the end, which determined the winners and awarded prizes.

Such activities exemplify how cooperative learning can combine academic rigor with student engagement, particularly in language and debate-focused settings. Moreover, the Australian lecturers facilitated the organization of Chinese

learners into diverse groups, enabling them to engage in presentations and role-playing activities.

Although the teaching methods employed by Australian lecturers effectively captured the attention of Chinese learners and enhanced their engagement, they also led to some misunderstandings and confusion. That was particularly evident when the Australian instructors provided students with significant freedom. For instance, S23 recalled, "In our economics class, the teacher asked us to prepare an activity, come up with our ideas, choose or create a brand, and express the characteristics of the service ourselves." Some students felt quite perplexed when first encountering this approach.

The foreign teacher would not tell us how to proceed in the middle; they just told us what needed to be completed in the end. It was quite confusing because we did not know what the specific requirements were. (S23)

However, students eventually realized that:

... all those things were in the book. When I looked at it again, I felt that the teacher did not need to explain it in class, and I understood the lecturer better. (S17)

It was found that the traditional lecture-based teaching method remained predominant in many Chinese classrooms and was often delivered in a rigid and didactic manner. That echoed Dai, Matthews, and Renshaw (2020), who observed that Chinese lecturers tended to position themselves at the center of the classroom and directly impart detailed knowledge in transnational programs.

However, some educators are pioneering innovative strategies to enhance student participation and accountability. The Chinese instructors implemented a variety of interactive strategies, including group activities, presentations, and role-playing exercises in the classroom. For example, S19 recounted a specific activity arrangement conducted in a course led by a Chinese teacher:

The teacher split us into a few groups at the start of the semester. And then, in each class, one group would come up to do a news report. You could pick your way, like record a video or be a

host or something and talk about the companies that you think are popular at the moment, like their marketing strategies and stuff.

Moreover, S2 detailed the procedures for a role-play activity:

If it is a role-play, it is a group of roughly two to three people. You will be given a topic to make up your own story. You will have about 5 minutes to get ready. After 5 minutes, one group will be randomly chosen to go up and act it out.

It is noteworthy that, although many students are captivated by the teaching methods of foreign instructors, a cohort of students still prefers the traditional Chinese classroom approach. For instance, student S6 expressed this preference.

It is just a habit from my school days before. I am still more used to the way Chinese teachers do it. They give us more exercises to do. Foreign teachers are more likely to have class discussions or do activities they think are fun, like group discussions and such. I am still more used to having the teacher in class and giving us some questions to complete.

This participant appeared unable to differentiate between middle school and university education, as he continued to adopt a learning style more suited to middle school, preferring to improve his academic performance through repetitive exercises. Additionally, when discussing why she preferred courses taught by Chinese instructors, S2's response revealed another reason: a sense of fulfillment or the richness and compactness of the course content. This packed and fast-paced learning experience gave S2 a feeling of productivity and a strong sense of achievement in her studies.

It makes our classes feel quite fulfilling; the entire lesson is packed with content. It makes the classes more interesting, and I think the arrangement is good. I enjoy these fulfilling and busy classes. After finishing a lesson, I feel really happy, like, 'Oh, I learned a lot!'

According to Dai, Matthews, and Renshaw (2020) and Dai, Lingard, and Musofer (2019), the divergent instructional methodologies employed by foreign and Chinese faculty yielded contrasting learning orientations: foreign educators' student-centered approach facilitated independent

learning practices, while Chinese instructors' teacher-dominated pedagogical style fostered student dependence on detailed scope transmission. We contend that the differences between these two teaching approaches cannot be fully equated with the distinction between foreign and local faculty members. In other words, it cannot be assumed that Australian teachers inherently favor student-centered teaching methods, while Chinese teachers invariably adhere to teacher-centered approaches. As our findings suggest, some Chinese teachers in the transnational IET program also employ diverse teaching methods to create more dynamic classrooms, effectively fostering student engagement, initiative, and creativity. It is also noteworthy that Chinese undergraduates have their preferred styles and approaches to teaching, and they might not highly evaluate or even get used to the Western lecturers' ways of instruction easily.

4 CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Using an interpretive phenomenological approach this research explores Chinese undergraduate students' learning experience in a transnational IET program through three main themes. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering valuable insights into the complexities and nuances of implementing transnational IET programs in Chinese higher education institutions.

The research provides some empirical data for improving the teaching quality of transnational IET programs in the higher education internationalization context. Some suggestions and implications regarding the teaching and learning practice can be:

1. First, it is recommended that at the institutional level, the university should improve the administrative system to provide better services for transnational IET programs. Cross-border joint ventures may be more demanding in terms of institution-level support and management. For example, the student assessment and workload found in this study are much related to the teaching-learning administrative system. The rigid assessment method demonstrates the institution's inflexibility in managing transnational programs. These inflexible regulations potentially and negatively influence Chinese teachers' enthusiasm to reform teaching and assessment through transnational programs. Taking courses taught by teaching staff from two different cultures can be both exciting and exhausting, which is why the students are so overworked. Managers and educators should realize that good learning outcomes are not necessarily related to the amount of workload. In other words, superabundant curricula and tasks would not lead to better learning outcomes. Therefore, it is recommended that both Chinese and Australian administrators should work together to find a sound approach to help learners achieve better results using appropriate learning tasks and workload.
2. Second, both Chinese and Australian teachers should increase opportunities for promoting communication and cooperation in teaching. It is found in the present research that many Chinese teachers have studied abroad, particularly in some English-speaking countries. They are thus expected to have few linguistic and cultural barriers while communicating with their foreign counterparts. Given that many Australian teachers have very limited time in China, it is suggested that Chinese teachers proactively communicate thoughts and ideas about teaching with the Australians. Both groups should learn from the students' feedback to improve their teaching.
3. Third, the learners themselves are advised to cherish their educational opportunities to learn in the transnational programs. The tuition fee for such a cross-border joint program was found to be very high, about four times higher than that of normal domestic programs. However, their money can be well spent, since all of them experience a cross-cultural learning and teaching environment, which is impossible for other domestic programs. Given that foreign teachers often provide much freedom in learning, the students are expected to be enthusiastic and change their role from passive to active. It is found that most foreign teachers are friendly and tolerant and welcome the Chinese learners' willingness to communicate with them.

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