ON CHINESE STUDENTS NAVIGATING INTERCULTURAL AND EMOTIONAL BORDERS IN TESOL CLASSES IN A PORTUGUESE POLYTECHNIC

OS ESTUDANTES CHINESES QUE NAVEGAM AS FRONTEIRAS INTERCULTURAIS E EMOCIONAIS NAS AULAS DE TESOL NUM POLITÉCNICO PORTUGUÊS

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Mark Daubney *mark.daubney@ipleiria.pt*
Doutor em Didática pela Universidade de Aveiro (Aveiro/Portugal).
Professor na Escola Superior de Educação e Ciências Sociais-Politécnico de Leiria (Leiria/Portugal).

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RESUMO

O presente estudo faz parte de um projeto mais abrangente que explora os múltiplos impactos que um programa de estudos no exterior de um ano de duração numa instituição de ensino superior portuguesa teve sobre os alunos chineses e analisa como esses alunos perceberam e geriram suas experiências dentro e fora da sala de aula. Este artigo se concentra em sua experiência em sala de aula e tem dois objetivos centrais: primeiro, explorar as formas pelas quais esse programa de estudos teve impacto sobre os alunos. Em segundo lugar, explorar os preconceitos identificados na literatura que poderiam condicionar a mentalidade e o comportamento dos professores e alunos portugueses em relação a esses alunos chineses. Os resultados desse estudo qualitativo – usando "*exploratory practice*" e uma abordagem longitudinal e etnográfica - apontam que uma experiência fundamental desses alunos chineses foi aprender a navegar por várias fronteiras - linguísticas, culturais, políticas e emocionais - em um ambiente linguístico imersivo.

Palavras-chave: Aulas de EFL. Emoções. Estudar no estrangeiro. Identidade. Competência intercultural.

ABSTRACT

This study, part of a larger project exploring the multiple impacts that a one-year study abroad programme at a Portuguese higher education institution had on Chinese students, looks at how these students perceived and managed their experiences both in and outside the classroom. This paper focuses on their classroom experience, and has two central aims: firstly, to explore how this study abroad programme impacted students; secondly, to explore preconceptions identified in the literature regarding Chinese students which might constrain the mindsets and behaviour of Portuguese teachers and students towards these. The results of this qualitative study – deploying exploratory practice and a combined longitudinal and ethnographic approach – point to how a key experience of these Chinese students was learning how to navigate multiple borders – linguistic, cultural, political, and emotional – in an immersive language setting.

Keywords: EFL classes. Emotions. Studying abroad. Identity. Intercultural competence.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The students who are the focus of this paper were Chinese students enrolled on a one-year study abroad programme called Chinese-Portuguese-English Studies (CPES), administered by the School of Education and Social Sciences - Polytechnic University of Leiria (ESECS-IPL) from 2014-2015 until 2019-2020. The last time the programme ran was in the 2019-2020 academic year, but this was cut short by the pandemic, and students gradually returned to China over the following months.

The main objective of these students was to further develop their learning of Portuguese and English and return to their final year of university studies in China. The study programme was divided between Portuguese and English language disciplines, with one elective module per semester outside these disciplinary areas. To facilitate integration within the ESECS-IPL community, students were encouraged to take disciplines that would involve moving beyond language-based disciplines, such as sports, drama, economics or dance, but which would still entail learning and using Portuguese, and English as a mediating language. The students had little to no previous contact with Portuguese, so both students and teachers, barring Chinese lecturers teaching Portuguese, used English as a tool of mediation for both academic and social purposes. Despite the name of the course, no Chinese language disciplines were part of the study programme.

Many of the CPES students studying at ESECS-IPL found themselves in a nexus of challenges: firstly, this was their first extended stay abroad, a factor likely to impact and amplify the exciting, but often daunting aspects of learning to live and study in another country; they spoke little to no Portuguese; Chinese culture and language were not as familiar to many Portuguese teachers and students as were other European languages and cultures; for many students, their families had made significant financial sacrifices for them to take this course; and Portuguese was seen by them as a language of opportunity, with growing opportunities in China for those who were proficient, meaning CPES students felt a considerable responsibility to do well, with academic success being prioritised.

This context, then, provided the present author – both the coordinator of the programme and one of the CPES English lecturers – with a rich setting to conduct research.

This study addresses the multi-layered experiences of CPES students and contends that they were learning how to cross multiple borders such as linguistic, cultural, political, and emotional – in an immersive language setting.

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2 CONTEXT, RESEARCH DESIGN AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

ESECS-IPL is a Portuguese higher education institution (HEI) which has been at the forefront in Portugal of creating and establishing protocols and agreements with Chinese HEI, with the aim of increasing international cooperation and attracting increasing numbers of Chinese students. Designing and running courses form a crucial strand of this policy. In fact, one of the aims of the CPES course was to allow students successfully completing the course to transition to the Applied Portuguese three-year degree programme, with credits being awarded to CPES students for several disciplines on the above three-year degree.

The present study, then, was influenced by key influences that, in turn, shaped the methodological considerations and overall research design. These include globalisation, internationalisation, and the resulting but evermore urgent need for HEIs to further develop projects and networking opportunities, and secure students on study abroad programmes or on Portuguese undergraduate degrees. In terms of the students' needs, the teaching staff at ESECS-IPL felt there was a pressing concern to develop their language skills and intercultural competence to give them a greater chance of success whilst studying and living in Portugal.

As previously noted, as coordinator and lecturer of the CPES programme, this placed the present author in a privileged position. Weekly contact with the CPES students themselves and monthly meetings with the CPES lecturers provided ample opportunities – both formal and informal - to gather data concerning experiences both inside and outside the classroom, as well as gain insights into the students', the lecturers' and my own attitudes and beliefs as we encountered each other, and the other.

Over the six-year period, the two broad research objectives were as follows:

1. To explore the impact of this study abroad programme on students.

2. To explore the preconceptions identified in the literature which might influence the thinking and attitudes of Portuguese teachers and students who encountered CPES students.

Given the length of the CPES programme, a combination of longitudinal and ethnographic approaches was deemed appropriate, the former more likely to capture the emotional highs and lows of students' experiences over time, the latter to obtain the rich detail arising both in and beyond the classroom. Underpinning the research design was the aim of allowing key events and especially 'critical moments' (Block, 2007) to emerge from the data.

Block understands these 'critical moments' as periods of self-reflection in which we constantly question our identity and find many of our key references in life being upended. The self-reflection on

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our identity constitutes 'critical experiences', which are characterised as a form of conflict or identity crisis which arises:

> ...when individuals move across geographical and sociocultural borders. In such situations individuals often find that any feelings they might have of a stable self are upset and that they enter a period of struggle to reach a balance. At this stage, it is easy to conceive of identity as contested in nature as the new and varied input provided to the individual serves to disturb the taken-for-granted points of reference. (Block, 2007, p. 20)

Although Block is referring to adult migrant learners when talking of this concept, it is reasonable to posit that study abroad students, such as those on CPES, also go through analogous feelings. Indeed, given the previously noted constellation of challenges facing CPES students, the concept of moving across 'borders', gleaned from Block, is considered an appropriate research metaphor to capture the key experiences of these students. Their sense of self is open and vulnerable to unsettling emotional experiences, and this can be particularly evident when learners are learning to learn and to use a second language in an immersive-learning setting.

At the end of each academic year, adjustments were made to some of the data collection instruments, such as the initial and final questionnaires, to incorporate the growing experience and knowledge of all the teaching staff involved on CPES. As a result of these adjustments, for example, extra-curricular and voluntary activities were introduced to increase diversity of events and opportunities to be in contact with Portuguese students and teaching staff studying and working on other courses. These included local dance competitions, study trips, surfing and cooking classes. It was hoped these would put in place opportunities for CPES students to integrate into the IPL community, provide affordances for language learning outside the classroom and increase their knowledge of Portuguese culture. A further aim was to shift students' focus away from their concern with academic success. Whilst this could be interpreted as counterproductive, it was thought that such involvement would, on a year-long programme, promote authentic openings to develop relationships within the academic community and beyond, and a broader use of communicative skills in Portuguese, which, subsequently, would impact positively on their academic performance, especially in Portuguese disciplines.

The aim, then, was to collate rich data from a range of activities that would hopefully capture and represent a broader picture of this international exchange programme and the experiences of students enrolled on it.

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It is worth noting at this juncture that studying a foreign or second language, together with the attendant learning of a different culture, is often assumed to be a positive force in breaking down stereotypes of the other, but Byram (1990, p. 76), in an early contribution to the then burgeoning field of studying culture in the language classroom, points to how the study of languages can, in fact, reinforce the very stereotypes that language educators hope to combat.

This fact, therefore, places the language practitioner at the centre of mediating experiences through the type of activities implemented and how these activities are delivered in the classroom.

It was in the classroom where greater proximity was established with the students, so the classroom was the focal point of the project. Therefore, a teacher-led inquiry approach known as 'exploratory practice' (EP) (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009) was built into the research design.

In contrast to other teacher-led research traditions, such as 'action research', which frequently aims to identify and 'solve problems', with the research itself often being undertaken by researchers going into settings other than their own, EP emphasises the importance of teachers working in their own classrooms, with their own students, and collecting data through classroom activities. This approach can be characterised as more teacher-friendly and has gained traction over recent years in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), including with practitioners who may have previously viewed research as something beyond their remit and capabilities (Etherington & Daubney, 2017).

Further, EP aims to deepen 'understanding' and explore the 'quality of life' in the classroom (Allwright, 2003), something more likely to be attained if both teachers and learners join forces in addressing issues of relevance. This, then, was considered a suitable lens through which to study students from a more distant culture living and studying in Portugal. Further, it was considered crucial that the 'voices' of the students themselves be expressed and considered.

Over five CPES intakes, there was a total of 74 students, 64 being female and 10 male. In Table 1 below, these numbers are distributed to show the number of students for the intake for each academic year.

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Table 1 – Number of CPES students over 5-year period

Year	Male or female	Total
2014-2015	14 F	14
2015-2016	12 F; 1 M	13
2016-2017	16 F; 5 M	21
2017-2018	8 F; 4 M	12
2019-2020	14 F	14
		Total: 74

To allow for triangulation and a rich data set, the following activities were used as data collection instruments:

1. Student profile questionnaires applied at the start of the academic year.

2. Learner histories: students made an assessed oral presentation about their own language learning histories and professional aspirations.

3. Written compositions, class discussions and debates.

4. Researcher notes taken on: teacher-student email exchanges; informal conversations after class; class incidents; and interviews with selected students.

5. Student questionnaires applied at the end of the academic year.

Data collated was subject to content analysis, largely qualitative, with student experiences being placed in one of four – but not mutually exclusive – categories: linguistic, cultural, political, and emotional.

In this paper, the data focused on is taken from the initial and final questionnaires, including examples across the five CPES editions to give a sense of the patterns and issues that students chose to voice about the English classes that were also frequented by Portuguese and, in some cases, other international students. These classes were part of a Media Studies degree programme, and effective communication was prioritised over accuracy.

In terms of research, a significant number of studies into Chinese students have been undertaken, with a sizeable number of these focusing on their perceived propensity for 'silence' and/or 'reticence'. Earlier studies (e.g., Ballard & Clanchy, 1984) represented Chinese students as having strong preferences for memorisation and repetition. Later studies (e.g., Cheng, 2008; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Mak, 2011; Peng, 2007; Xie, 2010) see silence and repetition as complex factors being conditioned and shaped by other factors underlying them. Bao (2014) refers to 'silence' as a strategic competence to be developed, appealing to what he dubs 'silent engagement pedagogy', with teachers urged to understand and incorporate activities into the class to accommodate this state. Reticence, however, he views as a state

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conditioned by barriers to learning and participation, such as concern with perceived cultural differences, speaking anxiety, and worry about what both teacher and classmates will think of their contributions.

Yet, silence and reticence are also related to the teacher. In Tsui's (1996) influential study of English teachers in Hong Kong, many teachers reported that "they themselves dislike or are afraid of silence and that they feel very uneasy or impatient when they fail to get a response from students" (p.151). Tsui found that teachers do one of three things when confronted by silence: allocate the turn to another student; provide the answer themselves; and, finally, repeat or modify the question.

More recently, Yan and He (2020) have investigated Chinese student teachers' reticence and found a combination of dispositional and circumstantial factors contributed to this, highlighting the dynamic nature of the classroom environment, how participants mutually influence each other and downplaying the more trait-like emphasis on characteristics of Chinese students. This is the caveat of Zhou et al.'s earlier study that emphasising the individual characteristics of Chinese students "without considering aspects of the educational context with which those characteristics interact, may over-simplify and distort the mechanism underlying their silence in the classroom" (2005, p. 287).

The Chinese students frequenting the CPES programme, then, in many ways provided both ESECS-IPL lecturers and students with rich challenges, and falls into the established tradition of research that has seen East Asian students become a rich area of interest in the TESOL field:

> Given the differences in political, historical, geographical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds of Chinese students and their peers in the Western/English settings, the marked difference in these students' in-class behaviours has caught the attention of researchers, especially those interested in ESL/EFL (i.e. English as the second language/ English as a foreign language) education and of cross-cultural pedagogies. (Zhou et al., 2005, p.288)

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A rich array of data emerged from students' written and spoken contributions, with these being indicative of their negotiating challenges, constraints and opportunities that arose in their time at ESECS-IPL. As previously stated, the data focused on and discussed in this paper is taken from the initial and final questionnaires.

Regarding the four categories of analysis, students' comments often overlap between two or more of these, and sometimes cut across all four. An example of the latter can be seen below in one response to

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a question on the initial questionnaire, the question being: 'In what ways are you excited about studying and living in Portugal?'

> I have more free time to control. I can try to learn to search information and learn more by myself. A creative and free life. I can make friends and travel to Europe. Learning Portuguese and English, including the grammar. Make friends with local people. Maybe I will talk to my teachers about my feelings. (Female CPES student's own words, 2016-2017)

Here, then, are clear indications of a student engaging with an immersive language experience, which in turn may enable her to make inroads into a multilingual and globalised world, a vital phase of intercultural learning encouraging their openness to other educational experiences and global citizenship.

In response to the question on the final questionnaire, 'How were your classes here at ESECS different to those in China?' one male student gave the following answer:

> Teachers in ESECS use English to teach English – they encouraged us to open our mouths. To be honesty, I don't like teamwork. It's not effective. I'm introverted really, but there were many teamwork and presentations here. But I'm getting used to it. In China I'm nervous about the English tests. The classes are less strict here. (Male CPES student's own words, 2015-2016)

One of the principal aims of the questionnaires was to collate data on their perceptions of their future and complete experiences in the English classroom. The observations above centre on the pedagogical contrasts between his prior and present experiences of English classes, albeit he does refer to a particular characteristic – introversion – that is often attributed more stereotypically to Chinese learners. Yet, like many of the comments of the CPES students, these observations again cut across the categories – the concern with language (discrepancies in levels of difficulty of tests) and methodological options (presentations and 'teamwork', with the latter being a reference to pair and/or group work), cultural aspects of the class ('less strict') and emotional responses ('nervous' about tests in China, and not liking group work). In some respects, such comments could be interpreted as potentially reinforcing certain stereotypes of Chinese learners, that is, preferring individual work, a focus on demanding tests and a certain respect for authoritarian teaching styles in the classroom.

However, there is also a sense that he recognises having been encouraged by teachers to speak in the classroom in Portugal and that practitioners may use English less frequently in China. Furthermore, he refers to "getting used to it", which may immediately refer to doing presentations, but could also be interpreted as the contrasting styles of classes in a broader sense. Given the CPES course was an

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academic year in duration, this could be interpreted as signalling a growing acceptance of the difference encountered. From a research perspective, this can be represented as a shift away from seeing Chinese learners being viewed in more essentialist terms to a perspective that situates them in dynamic contexts, highlighting, thereby, the circumstantial influences that shape their behaviour, and not simply viewing them through the lens of dispositional factors that were discussed previously.

Two years later, a female student responded to the same question in the following way:

> In China we didn't have many chances to speak. Focus on grammar and writing. Everyone speaks Chinese. We don't have original atmosphere. Here classes are more active and free. It's unbelievable that we must get up very early at 6.30 a.m. to read English loudly. Sometimes I considered myself a high school student (Female CPES student's own words, 2017-2018)

Once again, there is a clear sense that the student is contending with shifting references, and moving across various borders – linguistic, cultural and emotional, with the latter category being expressed in terms of indignation at having to rise early to read aloud. There are echoes of the previous comments about experiences in China – chances to speak English in class being scarce, the perception of English not being used sufficiently – but there is also a sense that she appreciates what might be interpreted as the authenticity and greater dynamism of classes in Portugal.

The final questionnaire also yields interesting responses to the question, 'What challenges are you facing at the moment?' In the responses below, two female students focus more on the cultural and political considerations, respectively, but there is a sense of emotion that underlies the remarks. The first student – also enrolled on the first edition of CPES – states her dislike of Portuguese food and refers to the limited number of Chinese meals she can cook, before expressing regret that she is unable to understand Portuguese and how this will upset her parents.

> I can only cook few Chinese food and can't enjoy the food here. Everyone speaks Portuguese but I don't understand. I want to learn. It's so bad to let our parents feel upset. (Female CPES student's own words, 2014-2015)

Independence and freedom characterise the comments below, with specific mention of well-known social media, and the social limitations imposed on accessing these sites.

> I have free time to live independently. I have free time to control myself. It's a process of self-growth. In China we can't see some websites. Here we can see Facebook and YouTube. (Female CPES student's own words, 2015-2016)

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Although the questionnaires were principally conceived for gathering data from their English language classes, it is not surprising that on a one-year study abroad programme in a country far from one's own that the CPES students' choose to include a range of comments, comprising their experiences both inside and outside the English classroom, inside and outside China, and inside and outside Portugal, and the way they navigated the borders to and from these shifting destinations.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As Holliday & MacDonald (2019) point out, educators should exercise caution regarding stereotypical representations of East-Asian students, as these are often wrongly characterized as lacking critical thinking and autonomy because of their so-called collectivist 'Confucian cultures'. As a result, they are often not expected to meet the interactive requirements of communicative language teaching (CLT), still the predominant approach in the field of TESOL in western societies, and the methodology adopted and promoted in English language teaching in ESECS-IPL. In terms of research, it is also necessary, according to the same authors, to exercise caution regarding the acceptance of student observations and comments at 'face value', and to constantly question why participants decide to project a certain 'discourse of culture' at certain moments in time. Furthermore, self-questioning assumes an even more critical role from the perspective of the researcher:

> ...researchers also need to get to the bottom of why they themselves are vulnerable to taking what is said at face value... Researchers therefore constantly need to work hard to interrogate how they themselves are influenced by discourses and narratives that might lead them into being seduced by superficial data. (Holliday & MacDonald, 2019, p.12)

This may be of particular significance for practitioner-researchers working closely with their own students and using an exploratory practice approach. Nevertheless, whilst recognising such caveats, researchers need to acknowledge and work with the concerns, worries and tensions embodied in the words of participants. This project and the data generated, whilst not constituting a comprehensive examination and understanding of these students' lived experiences in Portugal, can reasonably claim to represent an important strand of the stories they chose to project and one which can be viewed as a negotiation or navigation of crossing multiple borders. In fact, one of the strengths of the EP research approach is for practitioners to be able to add further layers of interpretation to data-rich settings because they are working and learning with their own students.

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The CPES students brought with them an array of experiences, cultural differences, perspectives and mindsets, and these, in turn, interact, merge, flow and collide with the perspectives of both Portuguese students, and, let it be said, teachers – in both positive and negative ways. Regarding the latter, silence and reticence, along with perceived CPES student study preferences and learning strategies, were among the recurring 'concerns' cited by lecturers of both Portuguese and English, including the present author, notably in the first two editions of CPES, and during which lecturers were in contact with Chinese students for the first time in their careers. These attitudes echo previous research findings in which a lack of understanding of Chinese students' behaviour can lead to stereotypes being invoked as an explanatory lens through which to view events and conduct.

However, these learners are not static, but fluid, complex and dynamic beings, constantly struggling to make sense of their new surroundings, the people around them, and, most importantly, themselves. Further, their own words appear to undercut resistant notions – what has been called 'myths' in the literature – that may still be held by pupils and practitioners alike regarding their explanatory power, vis-à-vis the behaviour of Chinese students. This is especially pertinent when contending with the issue of 'silence', one of the factors the present author felt he had to contend with as a 'negative' feature of classroom interaction, and one which was mentioned in frustrating terms by other lecturers, hopeful of greater verbal interaction with Chinese students.

In fact, the CPES students did not directly refer to silence or reticence, but instead to references to their timidity or introversion. Yet, a regular pattern in the data was their referrals to more opportunities to speak in the classroom and the seemingly greater use of English as the medium of instruction by both students and teacher. In terms of their perceptions of their own behaviour and participation in class, they might have seen this as active. Recognising complexity as opposed to thinking in terms of simplistic dichotomies (silent-talkative, reticent-willing, for example) is likely to be a fruitful way to seek greater understanding. As Bao rightly points out, "…some of the existing silence discourse tends to summarize the behaviour of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students into one category and place the umbrella of Confucianism over it for convenient explanation" (Bao, 2014, p.6).

This vibrant setting, then, contains the seeds for genuine learning, and the potential for language educators to implement what Byram (2008) considers to be their main task: "…to educate, promote an ability to change perspective and to challenge what is taken for granted" (p.17). Indeed, in the context of this study, and taking inspiration from Byram's words, such an approach would allow the lecturer to raise awareness and challenge assumptions held by both host and incoming students, the latter navigating the complex frontiers involved when living and studying in another country. This is of particular relevance

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when the language classroom has both sets of students studying in it. However, to further explore, understand, and degrade preconceptions and stereotypes and to maximise the potential for learning that often lies in encounters with the other, this author urges language practitioners themselves to heed, reflect on, embrace and act upon Byram's words. As Cortazzi (1990) says when contemplating the issue of raising language teachers' cultural awareness, "In order to learn something, there is nothing like teaching it. Do we become what we teach?" (p.64).

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