

## **Intercultural interactions in Chinese classrooms: A multiple-case study**

Meaningful intercultural interactions are important to the achievement of today's educational goals, global citizenship and intercultural competence in particular. However, understanding of intercultural interactions between local and international students in classroom settings remains limited. There are few studies that simultaneously examine the way in which the learning environment is designed by the instructor to facilitate intercultural interactions and the way it is actually experienced by students of various cultural backgrounds. This study sought to unpack the complexities of intercultural interactions in Chinese classrooms. Data were collected from student and teacher interviews and classroom observations. Seven modes of meaningful interactions were identified, and four pairs of elements (i.e. openness and trust, structure and space, empowerment and confidence, and modelling and amplifying) were found to be essential. The distinct dynamics of Chinese classrooms are also highlighted.

Keywords: intercultural; international students; internationalisation; international education; Chinese students

### **Introduction**

It has been argued that meaningful intercultural interactions between local and international students on university campuses are important to the development of intercultural and global competence, essential skills in today's increasingly globalised workplaces (Deardorff 2006; Kudo, Volet, and Whitsed 2017). However, research suggests that the separation of local and international students is more common than their integration (Arkoudis et al. 2013), a phenomenon Tran and Pham (2015) dub 'international sticking together'.

One general conclusion from the literature is that meaningful intercultural interactions do not happen naturally, but require careful, intentional instructional designs, as well as adequate preparation of students' mindsets, skills, and behaviours (e.g. Liu and Dall'Alba 2012; Reid and Garson 2017). Another noteworthy finding is

that ignoring diversity in the classroom can be harmful. According to Hurtado (2001), for example, if students encounter cultural differences in the learning process in the absence of proper instructional designs, they can develop feelings of superiority or inferiority. Guidelines on teaching classes of ethnically diverse students have therefore been developed (e.g. Arkoudis et al. 2013; Jabbar and Hardaker 2012).

Several important issues surrounding intercultural interactions in classroom settings remain unsettled. First, the majority of studies in this arena draw on a single data source such as teacher interviews (e.g. Jabbar and Hardaker 2012) or student surveys (e.g. De Vita 2002). Second, they typically focus on general perceptions of such interactions, neglecting how they are facilitated by instructors and experienced by students in the classroom, meaning they are unable to fully unpack the complexities of intercultural interactions because it is the alignment of these elements that leads to productive learning (Volet 2001). Third, most studies to date pertain to the business discipline. In sum, there is a need for research examining the perspectives of both students and instructors and the classroom environments of multiple disciplinary settings (Kudo et al. 2017).

A final, important issue is that most studies are situated in Anglo-Western classrooms (e.g. Chalmers and Volet 1997; Schweisfurth and Gu 2009; Zhao and Bourne 2011), where local students are seen as possessing greater language proficiency and being more active than international students, who are generally quiet and passive. This is simply not true of most classrooms in Asia, which typically comprise a majority of Asian students and minority of international students from outside Asia, with the former often seen as possessing less language proficiency and being less active than the latter (Ladegaard and Cheng 2014). As many Asian countries are increasing the diversity of their student bodies through internationalisation (Ma and Zhao 2018), more

studies in the region are needed.

The study reported herein adopted a multiple-case approach to investigate intercultural interactions in four disciplines in one university in Hong Kong (HK). Its objectives were to (1) unpack the complexities of intercultural interactions in classroom settings and (2) analyse the experiences of instructors and students to identify elements that support meaningful interactions. We identified seven modes of meaningful intercultural interactions, as well as four pairs of elements – openness and trust, empowerment and confidence, structure and space, and modelling and amplifying – that are particularly important in Chinese classrooms.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Why are intercultural interactions so important and challenging?***

Learning through intercultural interactions is ‘a challenging, critical and thrilling endeavour – and can be deeply meaningful’, write Lehtomäki, Moate, and Posti-Ahokas (2015, p. 2024). High-quality interactions can lead to significant learning experiences and the development of intercultural competences, whilst poorly organised ones are associated with negative learning experiences and outcomes (Denson and Bowman 2013). However, as studies conducted in various settings have reported, the limited interactions between local and international students, and strong inclinations of both to work with peers with a similar cultural background, pose significant challenges (e.g. Kimmel and Volet 2012; Ladegaard and Cheng 2014; Montgomery 2009). Commonly identified obstacles to intercultural interactions include negative cultural stereotypes and prejudice (e.g. Ladegaard 2017), language and communication barriers (e.g. Tran and Pham 2015), different working styles and expectations (e.g. De Vita 2002), and assessment concerns (e.g. Kimmel and Volet 2012).

### *Conditions conducive to intercultural interactions*

Purposefully designed instruction is essential to meaningful intercultural interactions. Examples of such instruction include carefully designed groupwork among peers with different cultural backgrounds (e.g. Baker and Clark 2010; Lehtomäki et al. 2015; Reid and Garson 2017), classroom discussions and debates that use student diversity as a learning resource (e.g. Ramburuth and Welch 2005), and peer review and feedback (e.g. Arkoudis et al. 2013). These methods are often used in combination. For example, Reid and Garson (2017) incorporated self- and peer-evaluation tasks into their groupwork design to equip students with the attitudes and skills necessary to work across differences.

It is also important to design tasks that are both challenging and interdependent, and best solved by engaging with multiple perspectives. Bodycott, Mak and Ramburuth (2014), for instance, required local and international students to work in groups to collect local artefacts and undertake field-based research. Lee et al. (2014) argue that intercultural interactions are more effective in classrooms in which ‘diversity [is] explicitly recognized, valued, and engaged in the form of course content, and activities, and stated learning outcomes’ (p. 552).

Another strand of the literature focuses on preparing students for intercultural interactions. Marginson and Sawir (2011) identify the essential elements of such interactions as active student agency, communicative competence, and cross-cultural engagement, noting that sufficient common ground between students in the form of a common language, some shared cultural knowledge, openness and flexibility, and a motivation to engage is also necessary. Byram (1997) defines intercultural competence as knowledge of cultural norms and interactive processes, the skills to learn and interpret communication-related matters, and an open attitude, and Straker (2016)

emphasises that student preparation needs to target all students, not international students alone.

### *Intercultural interactions in Chinese classrooms*

Current understanding of intercultural interactions in Chinese classrooms or involving Chinese students is incomplete because it is largely gleaned from studies in Anglo-Western classrooms in which Chinese students are usually the minority, and may thus be invalid for Chinese-majority classrooms. For example, early studies reported that international students (who in many cases referred to Asian, especially Chinese, students) prefer rote learning, lack critical-thinking ability and are unable to adjust their way of learning (e.g. Ballard 1987; Samuelowicz 1987). This ‘deficit model’ of Chinese students in Western classrooms has been challenged (Chalmers and Volet 1997; Heng 2018), with scholars arguing that a tendency to use memorisation strategies should not be misinterpreted as indicative of non-participation (Chanock 2010).

Furthermore, the conflation of ‘Asian students’ with ‘international students’ is clearly erroneous, and the use of ‘Asian’ as a blanket term is in any case problematic. However, we do refer to Asian students in this paper, not only because studies of students with non-Western backgrounds report similar findings to those of Asian students in particular (e.g. van Oorschot 2013), but also because over 90% of students in HK are Asian, whether HK Chinese, mainland Chinese or from another Asian countries. Details of the study’s student composition are provided in the Context section.

The limited research conducted in Chinese classrooms, whether in HK or on the mainland, has reported a notable lack of interaction between local and international students, regardless of where the latter come from (Ding 2016; Ma and Wen 2018; Yu and Wright 2017). Two HK-based studies found that local, mainland Chinese and international students do not work together or socialise unless forced to do so by their

teachers (Ladegaard and Cheng 2014; Yu and Wright 2017). Language may be the culprit. For example, in a study conducted in four English-medium-of-instruction universities in HK, Yu and Wright (2017) identified a lack of English proficiency as the main challenge encountered by local and mainland Chinese students in group discussions and groupwork assignments, whereas their international counterparts frequently feel excluded by their groupmates' discussion of ideas in Chinese.

## **Research Design**

### *Conceptual framework*

Our framework posits that intercultural interactions occur at the experiential interface between environmental affordances and student agency (Kudo et al. 2017). Affordances refer to the perceived or actual opportunities in a given environment, and are often introduced by the instruction and support provided by the teacher, the behaviour of other students and cultural norms (Volet 2001), whilst student agency encompasses the motives and abilities students bring to the environment (Kudo et al. 2017). The experiential interface is where student agency interacts with affordances in a given learning situation (Volet 2001). Students' learning experiences are likely to be positive if they perceive their agency to be congruent with those affordances, and negative otherwise (Kudo et al. 2018). The following research questions guided the study.

- What meaningful intercultural interactions occur in the classrooms of the selected courses in social science, science, architecture, and law?
- How does the interaction between affordances and student agency in specific learning situations support those meaningful intercultural interactions?

We define meaningful intercultural interactions as interactions between local and

international students that go beyond daily conversations and lead to better student learning experiences, the development of multiple perspectives and intercultural competence, and an appreciation of diversity. We regard such interactions as socially constructed (Colvin, Volet, and Fozdar 2014; Halualani 2008).

### ***Multiple-case study and individual interviews***

The multiple-case study approach (Merriam 1998) was adopted to investigate intercultural interactions within their real-life context. We used the same process of investigation in four cases. In addition, eight one-on-one interviews were conducted with teachers who were unable to participate in the multiple-case study but were willing to attend one-off interviews.

### ***Context***

The study was undertaken in a HK-based, comprehensive, research-intensive university that has adopted internationalisation as one of its four strategic goals for 2016-2025. Its aims are to create an inclusive environment conducive to intercultural learning among students from 100+ countries and to develop students' intercultural competence.

Despite ongoing efforts, however, it is recognised that much more needs to be done in terms of adopting teaching pedagogies and creating classroom environments that exploit the cultural background and experiences of all students while taking cultural sensitivities into account and enriching the overall learning experience (Quality Audit Report of ABC University 2016).

In most of HK's publicly funded universities, the undergraduate student body consists of roughly 80% HK Chinese, 10% mainland Chinese and 10% international students. In the university under study, approximately 65% of international students are from other Asian countries, with 15% from Europe, 12% from North America, 7% from

Australia and New Zealand, and 1% from Central and South America and Africa.

Intercultural interactions within classrooms are inevitably influenced by wider societal factors. For example, Ladegaard and Cheng (2014) investigated prevailing stereotypes in HK and identified a social hierarchy that positions international (specifically Anglo-Saxon) students at the top, locals in the middle and mainland Chinese at the bottom. This is partially the result of a deep-rooted mentality in HK (and other post-colonial societies) that tends to place Westerners at the top of the ladder, as they are seen as representing modernity, progress and development (Paul 2011). That mentality seems to have survived HK's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Gu and Tong 2012). Moreover, the recent political situation has exacerbated the tension, and in some cases hostility, between HK and mainland Chinese students, with frequently heated discussion between them over HK's future, particularly its relationship with Beijing. In this respect, the Umbrella Revolution of 2014 was a seminal event (Kaiman 2014).

### ***Data collection***

Four cases were selected for this research, each representing a course in one of four disciplines: architecture, law, science, and social science. These disciplines were chosen for their differing natures: soft-applied (i.e. architecture, law), soft-pure (i.e. social science) and hard-pure (i.e. science). Teachers in the soft disciplines have been shown to embrace intercultural interactions to a greater extent and be more sensitive to cultural diversity than those in the hard disciplines (Sawir 2011). Examining such interactions across disciplines allows exploration of the role of disciplinary context. A potential limitation is our failure to include any hard-applied disciplines such as engineering.

The authors contacted the associate dean in charge of teaching and learning in



each faculty and invited him or her to nominate two to three courses that contain meaningful intercultural interactions. Invitations were then sent to the course leaders of the nominated courses, four of whom (one from each faculty) agreed to participate. Data for each course were collected from student interviews, teacher interviews and classroom observations (see Table 1). Approval was obtained from the University's ethics committee, and informed consent from all participants. We first interviewed the course leaders, focusing on affordances (e.g. instructional design), student agency (e.g. students' attitudes and motives) and the experiential interface (e.g. students' reactions to the instructional design). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Each participating teacher was also asked to select three to five class sessions that best demonstrated intercultural interactions, and those sessions were subsequently observed. Immediately after each observation, we invited students to attend a focus group interview centred on understanding their specific experiences of intercultural interactions during the session in question and the course in general. All interviews and observations were audio-recorded and transcribed.

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis comprised within-case and cross-case analysis (Merriam 1998). Within each case, the interview and observation transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), with descriptive codes generated and categorised into themes. The two authors first read through the data and together decided the size of a block of data, which in most cases covered an intercultural interaction. They then performed coding independently and resolved any disagreements through discussion, prior to which inter-coder reliability (Miles and Huberman 1994) was 76%.

The next step was to review and refine the themes with reference to those identified in the literature. Finally, the themes were defined and arranged in accordance

with the conceptual framework. The themes generated from the three data sources were also triangulated. A case description was compiled for each case and sent to the teacher participants for member-checking (Lincoln and Guba 1985), with the feedback obtained then built into the findings. Cross-case analysis involved examination of the interplay between local dynamics and general patterns (Merriam 1998).

[Table 1 here]

## **Findings**

### ***Meaningful intercultural interactions***

Seven themes were identified, each representing a type of intercultural interaction (see Table 2). For concise presentation, the word ‘peers’ is used hereafter to refer to students of different cultural backgrounds. Examples are provided to illustrate each theme.

[Table 2 here]

With the exception of Theme 4 (*Reflecting on authentic intercultural experiences*), all seven themes involve tasks requiring students to investigate a topic related to the course subject matter, in some cases directly related to an intercultural topic. Such investigations provide students with opportunities to take a position and form a perspective. In Theme 1 (*Critiquing and being critiqued by peers*), students’ positions are reflected in their homework, which is open to critique in the interactional process. Themes 2 (*Taking a position and defending it among peers*) and 3 (*Exploring/evaluating multiple perspectives*) are similar in the sense that they both demand that students study a wide range of perspectives before forming their own stances and different in that their subsequent interactional processes differ: the former

involves sharing and defending positions, whilst the latter involves reaching informed consensus.

Theme 4 is basically a reflective task, the special point being that students' reflections are triggered by authentic intercultural experiences. Themes 5 (*Contributing culturally related knowledge and learning from peers*) and 6 (*Researching a culturally sensitive topic in the community*) are different from the rest in the sense that the topics students are required to research are culturally related. Theme 5 involves students contributing their cultural knowledge and assisting their peers in understanding one another's perspectives, whereas Theme 6 involves interactions with various cultural groups in the community. Finally, Theme 7 (*Exploring otherness and revealing oneself to peers*) encourages students to link the topic under study (which may or may not concern a cultural issue) to their own experience, interests and identity.

### ***Affordances, student agency and experiential interface***

We also explored the environmental affordances and degrees of student agency, and interactions between the two, that support intercultural interactions. Here we present four subthemes that cut across the main themes. These subthemes are displayed in paired form (e.g. openness and trust) not only because the two concepts in each pair are closely related, but, more importantly, because they also represent the scenarios in which student agency was consistent with the affordances in the environment.

#### ***Openness and trust***

Openness and trust refer to an open, inclusive classroom climate characterised by trust between students and teacher and among students. The following quotes illustrate this subtheme.

Critiques can be very challenging... Some students don't like that at all... I had to gain their trust that I really wanted the best for them, trying to come here to be this hard person.... (Teacher, social science)

I feel quite comfortable interacting with others in the class. They are all my good friends. (Mainland Chinese student, social science)

Generally it's pretty easy to comment others' work in the class. Foreign students may be more willing to comment on others' work than Chinese or Hong Kongese... (International student, social science)

During the interviews, many of the students mentioned feeling comfortable working with their peers and commenting on their work. There was also general agreement with the view in the third quote above that international students are more willing to contribute to discussions, a situation perceived as normal. The teachers we interviewed tended to see this as a problem to be tackled, whilst the students, regardless of their cultural background, seemed to be comfortable with the status quo.

A number of the teachers and students noted that they had observed the separation of local, international and mainland Chinese students in earlier sessions, that is, before trust had been established. Three of the four cases (i.e. architecture, law and social science) involved teachers who intentionally tried to mitigate such separation. The most common intervention was to ask each group of students to contribute their opinions based on their personal experiences and to learn from their peers (i.e. Theme 5). A particularly noteworthy intervention occurred in the social science case: students were required to form groups, each including at least one student from each cultural group, and then conduct a project reporting the perspectives of local, mainland Chinese and international students on the Umbrella Revolution, a political incident reflecting notable conflict between local and mainland Chinese citizens (i.e. Theme 6). Openness and trust were highlighted as being of crucial importance in this intervention.

### *Structure and space*

Providing structured opportunities for intercultural interactions and creating a mental space for students to learn with peers of different cultural backgrounds were found to be important. Moreover, that space needs to be perceived by students as safe and comfortable. The student quotes below were acquired from a focus group interview held after a studio session in which students had played the roles of an architect, contractor, government representative and client engaged in a negotiation.

I like the discussion. When there is some dead air, not sure how to think the question, ... the facilitator would help us think from another angle.... (Local student, architecture)

We work together for an entire year.... We got to know each other pretty well, and we become more comfortable voicing our views and discussing with each other.... When we get asked really difficult questions ... that's when the studio becomes silent. We all fear that situation.... (International student, architecture)

The corresponding interview with the teacher revealed that he had intentionally created space for local students to use their local knowledge to help their international peers:

When I see non-local students in my class, I will spend time talking about HK matters in the subject.... I remind locals ... being inclusive... The studio involves a lot of local topics ... local students explain those to international students.  
(Teacher, architecture)

The studio design course mentioned in these excerpts seems to offer both structure and space, with students who regularly attend enjoying ample time to develop relationships and trust.

### *Empowerment and confidence*

Empowerment is about encouraging students to take a position and bring their own

personal perspectives into their learning. One teacher explained:

My duty ... is to empower them to pursue their avenue of interest, and allow them to bring in their personal perspectives .... What that translates ... is that international students ... bring in their perspectives on their own jurisdictions. They are not coming from only a different cultural background, but different legal knowledge. (Teacher, law)

Interviews with the teachers showed that they were all aware of the issue of confidence.

The lack of confidence among some students, according to one teacher, is due to a combination of language and psychological barriers:

For the local students, it's a bit hard for them to structure an argument. I think they are aware of that, and I try to encourage them not to let that stop them ... When they say something, I try to ask questions about it and go further. (Teacher, architecture)

Moreover, most teachers recognised local students' general reluctance to take a position and voice their opinions, with some trying hard to make empowerment work:

One of the big challenges was that many of my students weren't responding in class. In the US, everyone responds. But my local students were very quiet. ...you have to approach this differently. (Teacher, social science)

Some of the students also implied a lack of confidence during the interviews, albeit without using that word, as shown in the following quote from a student who talked about her hesitation about interacting with professors.

I like peer critique as we get input from other students rather than the professor, which makes it less intimidating. (Local student, science)

### *Modelling and amplifying*

The final subtheme is modelling and amplifying. Modelling refers primarily to teachers

speaking in an inclusive and professional manner, and explicitly revealing the rationale for their actions to students. During our observations, we recorded a considerable amount of modelling behaviour through which teachers demonstrated their intercultural sensitivity and professional conduct. Extract 1 shows the context in which one teacher attempted to create a safe space (see Figure 1), followed by modelling behaviour (see Figure 2).

[Figure 1 here]

[Figure 2 here]

Amplifying behaviours were also observed, with students imitating their teacher's style when critiquing their peers. For example, in Extract 3, the students affirm the positive aspects of the work in question before offering suggestions, try to make a connection with culture and focus on story construction.

[Figure 3 here]

Local students were sometimes observed to amplify the interactive behaviours of international students, but not vice versa. In most cases, when the teachers called for volunteers, it was international students who responded first. For example, in a law class, when the teacher posed a question to the whole class (~60 students), the first student to respond was an international student who compared legal practice in the US with that in HK (Theme 7). A few students, including local and international students, then raised their hands and spoke, several of them adopting a comparative angle similar to that of the first student.

## **Discussion**

### ***Meaningful intercultural interactions***

Our findings show that intercultural interactions in the classroom are complex and the result of thoughtfully planned instruction, which supports studies advocating purposively designed instruction (e.g. Liu and Dall’Alba 2012; Reid and Garson 2017). Moreover, intercultural interactions require investigations, either individually or in groups, of topics that are sufficiently multifaceted in nature. Alternatively, students need to be presented with meaningful substance, often in the form of authentic experiences, news or incidents, before they can engage in meaningful interactions. The literature contains examples of tasks that prepare students for interactions in intercultural groups (e.g. Reid and Garson, 2017), and our findings further demonstrate that such tasks can take a variety of forms (see Table 2).

In the intercultural interactions identified, culturally related elements were used as resources that added to the richness of the learning materials, which supports studies positing student diversity as an intercultural learning resource (e.g. Ramburuth and Welch 2005). More importantly, the perspectives of local, international and mainland Chinese students were equally valued, elicited and utilised to enhance understanding of the subject at hand, a finding that supports calls to prepare all students, whether international or local, for intercultural interactions (e.g. Marginson and Sawir 2011).

We identified eight supportive elements, grouped in four pairs, of intercultural interactions: openness and trust, structure and space, empowerment and confidence, and modelling and amplifying. Although these elements have been mentioned in previous studies (e.g. Lee et al. 2014; Marginson and Sawir 2011), we situate them in a conceptual framework that connects affordances and student agency through the experiential interface. More specifically, the creation of an open environment by the



instructor is associated with a trusting relationship among students and between students and the instructor. Further, an instructional design structure needs to be present, with an appropriate and comfortable space perceived by students. Empowerment afforded by the instructor is associated with student confidence to express opinions and exchange ideas in English with people of different backgrounds. Finally, modelling and amplifying behaviours are associated with each other.

Of the four cases, the social science case covered all seven main themes (Table 2), whilst the science case covered just three. Furthermore, the former exhibited the natural incorporation of intercultural dimensions into the pedagogical design, with those dimensions being connected to, or part of, the subject knowledge, whereas intercultural perspectives were more of an add-on in the three other cases. This finding is consistent with the assertion by Kirk et al. (2018) that certain disciplines are more receptive to intercultural interactions than others. As only one course per discipline was selected in our study, we do not intend to generalise, but simply to note that the social science discipline made the greatest use of student diversity among the disciplines examined.

### *Dynamics in Chinese classrooms*

Our findings suggest distinct dynamics among local, international and mainland Chinese students. The participating international students, whether from Western or Asian countries, were typically more active than their local or mainland counterparts, as evidenced by the observation data. Interviews with the teachers and students further confirmed this phenomenon to be ‘normal’, which implies the existence of the aforementioned social hierarchy (Ladegaard and Cheng 2014) placing international students at the top and helps to explain why it has long gone unquestioned by students. Two reasons quoted by students for their hesitancy to participate in intercultural interactions were a lack of confidence to take a position and speak publicly and the

perceived social norm that one does not challenge one's peers, which is consistent with the findings of Marginson and Sawir (2011).

Language is another issue. English is not the first language of most HK students though all publicly-funded universities adopt English as the medium of instruction. Accordingly, as Pennycook (1996) notes, many feel that they do not 'own' English and struggle to express themselves in English. Most international students in HK, in contrast, speak English at or close to native-speaker level. As many of the tasks involved in intercultural interactions, e.g. taking a position, require originality, this lack of language ownership likely hinders local and mainland Chinese students while empowering international students. Some of the teacher interviewees agreed that the relative passivity of Chinese students stems from both language and psychological barriers.

That being said, our results indicated that Chinese students are as active as international students when all students are situated in an open and trusting environment (i.e. *openness and trust*); encouraged to take a position or express their opinions (i.e. *empowerment and confidence*); provided with sufficient time and opportunities to research their positions, share their thoughts in small groups or practise in anonymous ways (i.e. *structure and space*); and provided with learnable practices by instructors or peers (i.e. *modelling and amplifying*). In situations where their knowledge and expertise were valued, local students actively offered support to non-local students in discussions focused on HK-based regulations and policies, as evidenced in the architecture case.

We believe that the identified elements facilitate intercultural interactions in Chinese classrooms because they attend to the cultural traditions of respecting authority, valuing consensus and harmony, and refraining from disagreement in public. As Chanock (2010) argues, these cultural traditions should not be misconstrued as a lack of

critical-thinking and engagement; instead, they should be leveraged to create intercultural learning opportunities. The elements we identified also helped to disturb the 'accepted' norm that international students are more active and enhance Chinese students' language ownership by creating a relatively equal ground for all students to make useful contributions to discussions. Consequently, empowering students to take a position and providing them with a structure and safe space in which to prepare, organise and rehearse are extremely important in Chinese classrooms.

Different from Yu and Wright (2017), who cite English-language proficiency as a major challenge to discussion participation by local and mainland Chinese students, we found the main barrier to be their lack of confidence to take a position and share their opinions freely. Although this barrier may be associated with language ownership, it can be overcome by the presence of a purposeful instructional design and the supportive elements identified herein. In the context of Chinese students in the UK, Simpson (2017) argues that language issues need to be considered in interactional contexts such as enabling collaborative relationships between students rather than simply as speech and writing techniques, and recommends supporting students to work in culturally mixed groups.

### ***The intercultural lens***

Despite our focus on intercultural dimensions, we acknowledge that interactions are embedded in broader linguistic, social, cultural and historical patterns (Gu and Tong 2012). Although an intercultural lens allowed us to harness the opportunities conferred by cultural similarities and differences to enhance student learning, we agree with Straker (2016) that investigations of intercultural interactions need to move beyond a discussion of culture. For example, our data confirm the role of stereotypes and accepted norms in shaping such interactions. We concur with Ladegaard (2017) that HK

universities need to provide forums for critical discussions of prejudice before genuine intercultural interactions can occur.

### ***Limitations of the study***

One limitation of this study is associated with the sampling of the observations. Although relying on instructor nominations allowed us to observe representative sessions, we probably missed relevant incidents that occurred in other sessions or outside the classroom. To mitigate the potential negative impact of such omissions, we triangulated the data from instructors, students and observations. Additionally, each observation was immediately followed by student interviews, which enabled us to discuss specific incidents, thereby enhancing the study's validity.

### **Conclusion**

This study helps to unpack the complexities of intercultural interactions in Chinese classrooms. In addition to confirming the major conclusions of the literature, especially those regarding the importance of purposively designed instruction and the use of diversity as a learning resource, we provide new insights concerning the importance of space and trust, empowerment and confidence, space and structure, and modelling and amplifying.

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Table 1. Summary of data collection

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Data collected within multiple-case study</b>	<b>Additional data</b>
Architecture	1 teacher interview 3 class observations (6 hours) 2 focus group interviews (6 students)	1 teacher interview
Law	1 teacher interview 3 class observations (4.5 hours) 3 focus group interviews (10 students)	4 teacher interviews
Science	2 teacher interviews 5 classroom observations (9.5 hours) 3 focus group interviews (11 students)	1 teacher interview
Social science	1 teacher interview 4 classroom observations (12 hours) 2 focus group interviews (7 students)	2 teacher interviews

Table 2. Themes of intercultural interactions

Theme	Example	Discipline
1. Critiquing and being critiqued by peers	Individual students were invited to share their homework (e.g. a video) in the class. The teacher established a structure in which one or two peers from a different cultural background were invited to provide critiques of the homework with an emphasis on cultural perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law</li> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Social science</li> </ul>
2. Taking a position and defending it among peers	Students were asked to research a range of perspectives that could be used to analyse a sensitive/controversial issue before the class. During the class, the major perspectives were presented to the whole class, and students were asked to discuss them with their neighbours, take a position, and vote for their choices. The teacher debriefed them by comparing and consolidating all of the perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Architecture</li> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Social Science</li> <li>• Law</li> </ul>
3. Exploring/evaluating multiple perspectives and	Students formed culturally mixed groups and worked on a project in which a problem needed to be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Architecture</li> <li>• Social science</li> </ul>

<p>reaching an informed view/solution</p>	<p>tackled from multiple perspectives.</p> <p>Students examined all of the perspectives, discussed and evaluated their relevance, and reached a balanced and comprehensive solution.</p>	
<p>4. Reflecting on authentic intercultural experiences</p>	<p>Students were introduced to senior students from a previous cohort who shared their experience of undertaking intercultural groupwork projects in the same course the previous year. Students reflected on their past experiences of intercultural interactions and shared their reflection.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social science</li> </ul>
<p>5. Contributing culturally related knowledge and learning from peers</p>	<p>Students were asked to identify a topic in the local community and determine whether solutions from other contexts could be applied to tackle the issue. Local and international students assisted each other in understanding the topic and its context based on their own knowledge and experience.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Architecture,</li> <li>• Law</li> <li>• Social science</li> </ul>

6. Researching a culturally sensitive topic in the community	Students were asked to research the division between local and international students on campus. Views of students from different backgrounds were solicited, analysed, and discussed in class.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law</li> <li>• Social science</li> </ul>
7. Exploring otherness and revealing oneself to peers	Students were assigned to research a topic by choosing an angle connected to their individual interests and identity. Students then made presentations to the whole class and received feedback from peers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law</li> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Social Science</li> </ul>

Extract 1:

- 1 Teacher I am going to have you critique each other's work. I will wait until the
- 2 end. But will you be so nice to each other? Remember that we will not
- 3 improve if we are just nice. Absolutely, you can first tell us the
- 4 positive things you see in the piece. But if you stop there, it is not
- helpful.
- 5 Students (laughter)
- 6 Teacher Okay. Let us do that.

Figure 1 Extract 1

Extract 2:

20                    *A video created by a student is played (2 mins)*

21 Clara            (30s) That is a very interesting topic, martial arts. I learned a lot  
(inter-  
22 national)        from the story. *(3 lines of comments on technical details omitted.)*

26                    Why is this important to the topic of conflicts? Um...

27                    important to the topic of conflicts? Um...

28 Teacher        (30s) Okay.

34                    *5 lines of comments on technical details omitted.*

35                    The more important thing is you have to tell me a story. You need to

37                    give a bridge to the viewer; this is also what Clara is saying. If I look at

38                    it, I will not be able to connect. What is it that is going to connect it

39                    with me, somebody with a different ethnicity and from a different

40                    place?

Figure 2 Extract 2

Extract 3:

70                    *A student video is played (2.5 mins)*

71 Teacher        Anybody volunteer to critique?

72 Amy            (15 seconds) I love[d] it. I think it is a very beautiful story. It looks at  
(inter-  
73 national)       domestic helpers. It looks at cultures, minorities. The story itself is very  
74                    attractive. And the trainer is sympathetic and supportive.

75 Teacher        Anything else?

76 Lily            (10 seconds) I like the story a lot. (recording inaudible for 20 seconds)  
(main-  
land  
Chinese)

77 Marco        I think the shots are connected very well. They enhance the story.  
(inter-  
national)

78 Teacher        Of course.

79 Mathew        She [includes] a lot of different elements. All kind of perspectives.  
(local)

80                    Personally, I feel it is a bit too long and difficult to maintain people's  
81                    attention.

Figure 3 Extract 3