Crossing borders . . . shifting sands: An investigation of Chinese students' study experiences in the UK and China

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Abstract

In the current landscape of higher education in the UK, international students play a key role. It is an environment in which they not only cross borders physically but also transition through various identities as they develop their professional and linguistic confidence and skills to fully access and contribute to their programme of study and beyond. The aim of this paper is to outline the results of an empirical investigation into Chinese students' perceptions of their study experiences in the context of student mobility and English-medium instruction in higher education. It reports on a study of two groups of Chinese students – one group studying in an English-speaking environment, the other in their home country where instruction is delivered through the medium of English. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted at each site which focused on the transition of "crossing borders" for educational purposes. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The main finding was that both groups experienced remarkably similar learning issues, despite being located in very different learning environments and crossing different types of borders.

Keywords: student mobility; Chinese students; English for academic purposes (EAP); English as a medium of instruction (EMI)

1. Introduction

Crossing borders to access higher education (HE) is increasingly common. With processes of globalization and internationalization, HE is witnessing an ever-expanding number of students travelling outside their home country to access education – be it at undergraduate or postgraduate level. In recent decades, the number of students seeking to study overseas has risen exponentially. According to OECD (2017), the number of international students, defined in this paper as those who left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study, engaged in tertiary education has risen from 0.8 million in the late 1970s to 4.6 million 45 years later. The HE sector plays a vital role in a country's economy and international students are one of the foundations of universities' economies. Nineteen percent of students in the UK in HE were from outside the UK in 2016-2017. Of the 442,375 non-UK students, 95,090 were Chinese (HESA, 2018). Indeed, the main country of origin sending the largest number of students across borders to study is China, primarily to the BANA (Britain, Australasia and North America) countries (CCG, 2017). However, Chinese students are not only accessing English for academic purposes (EAP) and English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses abroad, but also increasingly in their home country. As this demographic is expanding rapidly, it seems pertinent to explore their experiences in the respective environments and consider what possible challenges and benefits each respectively poses for students. The aim of this article is to investigate Chinese students' study experiences in their first language (L1) and second language (L2) countries. Two sets of Chinese students – one in the UK and one in China – were interviewed via focus groups to determine their HE study experiences and perceptions as they transition through their respective studies in EMI in two different settings. At present, there is little literature available comparing these two kinds of settings and sets of experiences. It is hoped that this study will provide valuable insights for researchers but also practitioners of EMI and EAP in developing a deeper understanding of Chinese students, their needs, and their perceptions of their learning experiences in these two types of settings.

The article will begin by exploring the literature on student mobility focusing on access to education in the medium of English. Then, it will provide detail on the methodology employed and next it will present the findings emerging from the analysis of the data. It concludes with a consideration of possible implications for practice and next steps for empirical investigations.

2. Literature review

This section outlines EAP and EMI as avenues of acquiring English in the HE landscape. It then introduces the framework of the study in which transition of crossing borders is set and identifies key themes such as identity and communities of practice (CoP).

2.1. Understanding EAP and EMI in higher education

The current climate of HE is profoundly influenced by neo-liberal policies such as financialization, marketization and commodification where business-orientated management practices involve exploiting means of raising revenue (Cruickshank, 2016; Ding & Bruce, 2017). International students' demand for HE has led to a profitable revenue stream for HE institutions. For example, to facilitate this demand, programs such as EAP have proliferated in HE in the UK to service the increasing international student numbers, thereby generating considerable income for the institutions. EAP started to emerge as a specialist branch of language education in the 1980s to facilitate the global demand for English-medium university education offered in the main by BANA countries (Ding & Bruce, 2017). The purpose of EAP is to integrate knowledge, what Bhatia (2004, p. 144) terms "discursive competence," which includes "social, generic and textual competences," and skills to enable international students to communicate and participate effectively in their studies. EAP is, as Flowerdew and Peacock (2001, p. 8) assert, "the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language." Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002, p. 2) add that EAP means "grounding instruction in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines." The focus of EAP is not general language proficiency but language processing and production specifically for academic contexts. It caters for learners of diverse academic experience, including foundation, pre-sessional, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and involves a range of spoken and written genres (Hyland, 2006).

EMI is an increasing global phenomenon. It is defined as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (Dearden, 2014, p. 4). There has been an acceleration of EMI programs in non-Anglophone settings in recent decades (Baker, 2016). In Europe, where English is increasingly seen as the lingua franca and the language of higher education, its presence is observed in university lectures and seminars, and institutions are increasingly delivering content in EMI (Lueg, 2015). For example, the Nordic countries (specifically Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) have been at the vanguard in implementing EMI programs (Airey, Lauridsen, Rasanen, Salo, & Schwach, 2017).

EMI differs from EAP as it delivers subject content and not disciplinary language learning or the development of study and research skills. Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) argue it is a necessity for many university students in many countries to master English to access lectures and study materials in EMI. In fact, English could be viewed as a system of linguistic gatekeeping to HE. Moreover, for many graduates, it is imperative that they are able to function in English in the workplace, particularly for countries yet to come into economic prominence and for countries to remain a key player on the world economic stage.

Both the EAP and EMI approaches have the basic premise of improving proficiency in English. However, there are some key differences between them, which are important to understand in the context of this study. For example, as mentioned above, EAP is the primary vehicle to promulgate disciplinary language and (study and research) skills to enable international students to participate effectively in their university studies. In contrast, the raison d'être of EMI is to deliver subject content in English and language learning is not the focus but rather a by-product. In this study, both an EAP context and an EMI context are compared as the delivery of content in this study differs depending on the space where the students are situated. It should be noted, however, that the format and content in both of these contexts overlap – in reality, both are somewhat of an amalgam of EAP and EMI at both sites.

In HE, Duff (1997) has posited that L2 may affect learners' ability to examine abstract concepts. Studies have concurred that changing a language from L1 to L2 in tertiary education can impact negatively on content learning (e.g., Gerber, Engelbrecht, Harding, & Rogan, 2005; Yip, Tsang, & Cheung, 2003). Airey (2016) suggests the majority of L2 courses in HE are EMI as language learning in EMI contexts is often viewed as incidental and not the primary goal – in a university setting, students are expected to have the relevant language skills to complete the course before enrolling. Airey (2016) adds that in HE there are considerable demands on language as a device to construct knowledge, which could negatively affect content learning. However, he asserts that students generally seem to adapt by adopting strategies to manage the demands of EMI, but it is not clear whether this suits all student abilities.

2.2. Contexts of learning and using English

Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles, which represent the spread of English, can be used to describe the contexts of this research. His model positions the presence of English – the Inner Circle where English functions as L1 (e.g., the United Kingdom and the USA); the Outer Circle where English occurred due to colonization and functions as a L2 (e.g., India and Nigeria), and the Expanding

Circle where English is studied as a foreign language (e.g., China and Brazil). Davies (2013) suggests that the English in the Expanding Circle is fundamentally changing due to its functional range and is now considered a marker of identity in some contexts. The "circles" also indicate the different cultural backgrounds and the intercultural transitions the mobile learners need to engage in as they traverse from one circle into another. The transitions into EMI in HE also impact on students' identity. Global mobility of learners raises the complex relationship between national identity and L2 learning context (Gao, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Ortaçtepe, 2013). The concentric circles of Kachru's (1985) model provide a useful lens for reflecting on students' study and linguistic experiences as they transition from one circle to another physically or metaphorically.

Indeed, student mobility enables the concentric circles of Kachru's (1985) model to become less static. For example, the Chinese students who cross borders to study in the UK have relocated and repositioned themselves from the Expanding Circle to the Inner Circle where their study experiences will be heterogeneous due to the L2 environment (e.g., more opportunities for interaction in L2). The Chinese participants who metaphorically cross borders by having instruction in English will continue to be positioned in the Expanding Circle where their learning experiences will be slightly less homogenous than their fellow students in the Chinese University who will be studying in their L1, due to the L1 environment the participants inhabit. The expectation is that the study experiences of the students in the Expanding and Inner Circles will differ due to their markedly different social, educational, linguistic and cultural contexts.

2.3. Communities of practice and identities

Transitioning into different study spaces can be viewed as processes of socialization into new communities of practice (CoP; Wenger, 1998). A community of practice can be viewed as "a living context that can give newcomers access to competence and also can invite a personal experience of engagement by which to incorporate that competence into an identity of participation" (Wenger, 1998, p. 214). It is a space where participants engage and are able to transition from a "newcomer" to a developed member of "a privileged locus for the creation of knowledge" (Wenger, 1998, p. 214). As individuals transition from a peripheral member of a community to a more central position, their identities change and adapt as they negotiate their position within the new community and in relation to their other pre-existing identities.

Language also plays a key role in the construction of identity, and this role is complex and fluid. Kramsch (2009) argues the purpose of "multilingual subjects" is not just about acquiring new words and language for transmitting and

receiving information nor are they just intermediaries between cultures. She claims learners are affected intellectually, emotionally and physically in their identity construction and participation in CoP. Identity constantly involves negotiation and transformation as each individual negotiates their economic, political and cultural dependency in different ways (Hall, 1994). Gu's (2015) research on Chinese study abroad students and returnees affirms their learning experiences necessitate identity change which occurs across different settings and through different processes such as socialization and acculturation. She suggests that the crux of identity change is the emotional sense of belonging whether it be as an individual, a member of a professional group or an organization. Against this backdrop, it is clear how student mobility and participation in EAP and/or EMI CoP can potentially have a profound effect on the identities that students construct, maintain, form, and negotiate in fluid and dynamic ways that are linked to their past, present and hoped-for selves across the "circles" of English language use.

This study investigates Chinese students, who represent one of the largest consumers of "English," in both L1 and L2 settings. The study is based on an assumption that students' study experiences and their learning environments will impact on their identities differently, depending on the kinds of CoP, "circles" of language use they inhabit, and other social, educational, and linguistic conditions they face. The present study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of their study experiences in the medium of English?
- What are the differences in perceptions of studying in the medium of English in an L1 environment and in an L2 environment?
- What is students' sense of identity as they experience study in the medium of English?

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

The research involved two locations in the 2017/18 academic year. The site in the Expanding Circle is a collaboration between the Engineering Faculties at a British HE institution (BI) in Yorkshire and a Chinese HE institution in Chengdu – referred to as Joint School – where students are studying an engineering subject in the first (foundation) year of a 4-year undergraduate degree program. Students are metaphorically navigating through borders to experience EMI via British tutors from the BI, which includes physically crossing from one province to another for HE. The students at the Inner Circle site, the BI, have literally traversed borders to access education to study on the International Foundation Year

and pre-Master's EAP (two terms) programs before embarking on their under-graduate and postgraduate studies in their disciplines at the institution.

3.2. Participants

Chinese participants were recruited from the two HE institutions and two focus groups were formed, one each at the respective locations. The sample size of the study was seven participants in each focus group (see Table 1 for details). All participants were in their first year of study. The participants at the BI had been in the UK for nearly one year. Chengdu (Joint School) participants will be referred to as CPs and Yorkshire Participants as YPs; the number that follows the initials will indicate the student number from 1-7. Convenience sampling was used as participants were recruited from the researcher's teaching environment by responding to an advertisement. Due to the low response, it was not possible to control de-mographic variables. The low rate could be due to the timing of the research con-flicting with various deadlines and/or just a general lack of interest in the research.

Table 1 Participants

Geographical site	Nationality	Age	Gender	Level	Subject
Chengdu	Chinese	18-19	2 females 5 males	foundation year	3 mechanical engineering 3 civil engineering 1 computer science
Yorkshire	Chinese	18-19	1 female 2 males	foundation year	business finance
		22-25	2 females 2 males	postgraduate	2 transport planning engi-neering 2 international law

3.3. Ethics

This study has been mindful of questions pertaining to both the participants and the researcher with respect to power differentials, motivation, coercion and ex-ploitation (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002). Ethical procedures of both institutions were followed rigorously. This involved ensuring informed consent, both in English and in Chinese, to ensure transparency and avoid any misunder-standings, was obtained from all the participants; data was anonymized and par-ticipants were given the option to withdraw their consent at any point during the study without any adverse consequences. The students were made aware that their participation or their non-participation in the study would have no bearing on their grades.

3.4. Data collection

The research methodology for this study was qualitative as it best enabled the participants' voices and their experiences to be captured in an as authentic form as possible (Mauthner et al., 2002).

The data were collected through two focus groups which allowed the participants to be the "experts" and ensure that their subjective experiences informed the research. This technique was the optimum way to collect data from purposely-selected groups, and the participants were in a supportive environment (with fellow students) where it was believed that they would feel at ease and able to speak freely. The researcher facilitated the group discussions by means of open questions similar to a semi-structured interview. This was necessary to enable the discussion to progress in an open way, avoid prolonged silences and yet still ensure the discussion did not stray too far from the topic, while remaining flexible to student lines of interest.

The focus group interviews consisted primarily of open-ended questions to provide detail, depth and participants' perspectives on their experiences of studying in English with particular reference to identity. The following are example questions:

- Why have you chosen to study at the Joint School/ Yorkshire University?
- How do you perceive yourself at university?
- What are your perceptions of studying in English in your home country/ in the UK?
- What are your perceptions/views/thoughts of your subject content delivered in the medium of English?
- How has studying in English in your home country/in the UK impacted on your language learning/ your subject knowledge?
- How does studying in English compare to studying in Chinese?

They enabled the participants to respond fully using their own words. Further expansion of their responses was achieved by means of prompts and follow-up questions. The length of the focus group interviews was approximately one hour each, and the level of the researcher's participation in the focus group was minimal. The researcher asked the open-ended questions and in each case stepped back to allow the group to respond. The response to each question was a "conversation," which took place between the focus group participants. The researcher occasionally prompted and asked for exemplification and clarification to the points made. The focus groups were recorded on an mp3 player – audio only – with the consent of the participants.

The interviews were conducted in English at both sites by the researcher and the discourse was modified to facilitate comprehension and interaction. Even though the participants' English level in both settings was fairly similar –

approximately B2 according to the *Common European Framework of Reference* – and they had no difficulty understanding the questions, they generally appeared to find it difficult to articulate detailed, in-depth responses. One reason was thought to be that they had not encountered or considered these types of questions previously in their L1 so they found it problematic to articulate their responses fully in a L2. To mitigate this, the second focus group was forwarded the questions in advance to consider prior to the focus group taking place. However, they also experienced similar challenges. Possible reasons for their less detailed responses could be the level of language, perception of peers, and/or simply lack of opinions on the topic. In any follow-up study with such participants, it would be preferable to use individual interviews to see if this generated any more depth in responses. Nevertheless, both groups responded to all the questions, and although the data was not as detailed as envisaged, it was still able to provide valuable insights.

3.5. Analysis and coding

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically analyze the data (Charmaz, 2014; Clarke & Braun, 2016). The key themes that emerged were identity, internationalization, and CoP. The dataset from each site was analyzed individually and then comparatively across both sites, focusing on the main emergent themes. A mainly inductive approach to analysis appeared to be the most appropriate for understanding diverse and potentially unexpected perspectives, experiences, behavior, motives, views and identities that emerged, and it was also well suited to enabling learner voice to be heard (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The data were coded by the researcher and the themes emerged directly from the data and lead to the research questions being refined.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Identity

The YPs strongly identified themselves as Chinese or international students and Yorkshire student was an afterthought. Similarly, the CPs also viewed themselves as Chinese students first and then Joint School students second. In response to the question: "How do you perceive yourself at university?," both CPs and YPs found that dealing with their perception of self and identity was generally unproblematic. They could clearly identify who they are even though at times they appeared to be dealing with multiple identities (e.g., their national, cultural, student and potential professional identities) simultaneously. Their use

of the term *foreign* is also imbued in their identity and it is interesting to note that this term is also aligned to all non-Chinese (UK and international) students. They view their "foreignness" in relation to all students and concurrently all students are foreigners. However, the fluidity of their identity assists them to adapt as they view their future identities with certainty – currently inhabiting a liminal state (in-between transformative space) (Land, Rattray, & Vivian, 2014).

> *It is the first time I see a lot of foreigners* [foreigners here equals non-Chinese students including UK nationals] *and that I am the foreigner and a student at Yorkshire and a Chinese student.* (YP 1)[1]

> *I am a Chinese student at Yorkshire who will be both a business person and a transport engineer.* (YP 2)

> *Chinese student because I am from China and I come to Yorkshire to pursue my master degree for work.* (YP 3)

> *I see myself as a Chinese student and a Chinese lawyer.* (YP 4)

The adjective *Chinese* markedly emphasizes the Chinese element of their identity. It dominates all of the responses. This use of this "cultural" or "national" marker indicates the YPs perceive themselves as Chinese first and foremost as well as a student (as opposed to a student aligned to their institution of study) and their sense of self appears to be linked to their future identity (transport engineer/lawyer) in the long-term (economic) as opposed to their future identity in the short-term – a Yorkshire student. It suggests that the participants are signaling the different processes of transition in the language they use to describe themselves. They articulate the various transitions they envisage themselves in, are traversing through, or will traverse. In the immediate term, YPs are positioned in the Inner Circle having relocated from the Expanding Circle where they will return to play a full role embracing their "new" identity/ies. This sojourn into the Inner Circle is to further develop their language, skills, knowledge and opportunities to be part of a new CoP.

However, YP 1's response appears to "problematize" an understanding of self – he seems to use the same term to refer to himself and to the British (or non-Chinese) – *foreigner*. This complicates the understanding of self and other – the Other is me, I am the Other – we are both foreigners. Here "self" is not singular; it indicates two different identities held simultaneously. It is interesting to note that YP 1 referred to himself as a "foreigner" amongst "foreigners," in which term he stated he included UK nationals too. He perceived himself as a

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[1] Data extracts were chosen for their suitability in most concisely and clearly supporting the point being made in the findings.

"foreigner" and not only Chinese in this instance because he labeled himself as how he understands he is perceived by the "others" who are non-Chinese. It would seem, with respect to individuals, he views the world as a binary entity – one is either a Chinese or a foreigner (or maybe even both). This echoes Fong's (2011) study where her respondents talked about education overseas in a binary language – China versus abroad (abroad generally being favorable). Gao (2011) asserts the Chinese identity is heightened when they become "the other." Simultaneously, YP 1 is dealing with the challenges of adjustment, change, particularly relocating from a generally homogeneous to a heterogeneous environment, a sense of not belonging and alienation. Studies report these experiences and transitions by international students are not uncommon (Gu, 2015; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Nonetheless, the responses show the YPs are confident about how they perceive themselves and their cultural identity, which appears to be strong. For them, a positive meaning of identity is constructed through discourse, difference and the relation to the "other" (Hall, 1996).

Participants from Chengdu voiced similar sentiments:

At this moment we study at the Joint School – I am a Joint School student. I am a Chinese student ...[2] I am a student with ambition for the future. (CP 1)

I'm a Chinese college student ... who really wants to contribute to my country. (CP 2)

I am a Chinese student with the ability to confidently communicate with others and I will gain knowledge for the future. (CP 3)

A Chinese university student and an adult. I want to be a confident engineer in China. (CP 4)

As with the YPs' responses, these include the words *Chinese* and *student*. However, they are very self-centered and do not reflect much awareness or recognition of "others." Their statements also indicate the notion of transition through their language. They are all future-oriented and signal (a) transition(s) that they want to take place to enable them a future where they are able to navigate through social networks adopting identities which are given by society and not created by the individual. Kramsch (2009) has documented the complex, multiple and fragmentary nature of language constructing identity. She emphasizes that the "multilingual subject" is not just about learning language and a new culture. It is also about how they position themselves in and through their interactions in their languages, how the new culture is embodied within them and how this influences their identity by them becoming new individuals through the process of learning a new language and culture. The fluidity involves ongoing negotiation and transformation (Hall, 1994). Identity plays a pivotal role as

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[2] Unspaced ellipses like this one indicate pauses.

international students transition through their time at university, for example, from commencing their studies in a new environment as a pre-sessional EAP student to becoming an acculturated student of their program of study. The acculturation of both sets of participants in this study to some extent involves similar situations to become accustomed to, such as the local environment, local conventions, for example, communication, food and language – the local dialect when negotiating daily activities. The CPs' L1 "familiar" environment is perceived as less challenging to steer unlike the YPs. Here the Yorkshire group has other pressures such as being in a non-L1 locale, dealing with the "time difference" element and becoming acculturated into a cultural environment that is alien to the home culture. All these differentials have their own stresses, which need to be managed and negotiated. Gu (2015, p. 14) asserts that, in their search for a sense of belonging and understanding as well as being accepted and understood, Chinese students "learn to be engaged in a continuous and sustained dialogue." This takes place by self-reflecting and reflecting with other Chinese students about their cultural identities and social behavior and how exposure to the "other" has enhanced their knowledge of self and their values, and produced the ability to transition through their difficulties. This then positions them as both an "insider" and "outsider" as they traverse cultural borders (Gu, 2015). They intersect these borders by adopting identities, which can offer advantages and disadvantages, depending on which "field" is entered (Bourdieu, 1993). At each stage, the student is undergoing a number of transitions of how they perceive themselves and how they believe "others" perceive them. Each of these transitions and perceptions impacts on their identity, sense of self (Ickes, Park, & Johnson, 2012) and how they navigate and interact with the world around them.

The challenges with identities are perhaps surprisingly similar for both YPs and CPs. However, there is an extra dimension with respect to YPs' interactions with the host community in the Inner Circle where there appear to be tensions (e.g., linguistic and socialization tensions – such as very little interaction with the home students using English) at times. This does not appear to exist in the Expanding Circle setting to the same extent. Nonetheless, according to Gu and Schweisfurth (2015), Chinese returnees found identity transformation a profound experience enabling them to function at home with a new sense resulting in positive outcomes in personal development. This resonates with Gu (2015), who claims experiences in the UK developed a transnational outlook enabling Chinese cultural traditions and values to be viewed with more appreciation where identity is only transparent when students have returned to and developed their careers at home in the Expanding Circle.

4.2. Internationalization

In response to the question: "What are your perceptions/views/thoughts about your content being delivered in the medium of English?," it was interesting to note, regardless of the learning environment, how the term *international* and the sense of internationalization was embedded in all participants' responses. Within their understandings of internationalization, the sense of "Chinese" is embodied and adds another element to their view of self.

However, it suggests these terms (*international/internationalization*) were viewed in a very narrow focus, as opposed to the general understanding of the term in an educational context.

> *Now we communicate with each other in English and I think it lets us feel more international as well as Chinese. Good for the future.* (CP 4)

> *International because we are going to build the belt and road/silk road[3] from China we need people with international view and skills.* (CP 6)

> *We can in this school* [Joint School] *have both the international view and skills ... it is very important for work.* (CP 5)

The responses here move to the first person plural *we*. This seems to suggest the identity and transition are more communal as opposed to individualistic.

> *I want to build for my country. I also want to be an international student/engineer. I want to learn more knowledge so I can contribute better for my country.* (CP 2)

> *To be international it is not necessary to go abroad. Can be international working in a company with foreign people or communicating with foreigners.* (CP 3)

Even though CP 2 and CP 3 do not use *we*, they articulate sentiments that are community-oriented. They refer to what they could contribute to their country and to a company.

The participants in Chengdu appear to be connecting "international" to economic improvement – one can be deemed international merely by having contact with a "foreigner." Interestingly, despite the emphasis on "difference," they seem to have discerned a similarity among all "internationals" – they all speak the same language, English. This would suggest that to participate as an "international," English is the lingua franca and can be viewed as representing a form of linguistic capital. In the cultural domain, there are other meanings to

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[3] Belt and Road Initiative (also known as the Silk Road Economic Belt) is a development strategy adopted by the Chinese government to interconnect infrastructure across Eurasian countries to encourage trade and stimulate economic growth across Asia and beyond.

international than solely economic. It is not just material improvement. The term *international* here is also connected to a particular skill set: knowledge, language, views, and skills. Communication, sharing and working in partnership is embedded in their use of *international*, not unlike the UK's education internationalization strategy (DfES, 2004) and a general need for knowledge-based economies and highly-skilled individuals (UNESCO, 2013). Research shows the "international" communication skills Chinese students develop are highly valued and in demand in Chinese ventures with foreign companies (Gu, 2015).

The YPs' view of "international" is similar.

> *I will introduce myself as an international student from Yorkshire in China. It is important for self and my work in China.* (YP 5)

> *International and Chinese lawyer as I have been overseas and will give me advantage as dealing with problems from not just a Chinese perspective.* (YP 4)

Interestingly, these participants seem to have moved to a more self-centered way of expressing themselves, with *I* being the focus, whereas for CPs, "international" was more inclusive and community-oriented. The different "markers" taken on by these participants indicate the different guises they allocate themselves and how their identity is multi-dimensional.

The use of *international* in participants' responses is heavily economically-focused and connected to business, employability and acquiring knowledge. It is also aligned to interaction with individuals who are non-Chinese even though no overseas travel has been involved. It is an opportunity to present oneself as someone who has had opportunities (experience) to connect with the world beyond China and whose broadened outlook will benefit China. There appears to be much investment in being international as a positive trait and it seems to denote symbolic power too. For example, according to the participants, being viewed as international will enable more advantages in the world of work and personal standing (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2018; Gu, 2015).

The participants' engagement with the notion of internationalization is emulated in their crossings from the Expanding Circle to the Inner Circle and from one province in the Expanding Circle to another where they encounter more of an "international" experience. This interaction with the "foreigner" is viewed as increasing their social capital with respect to their future beyond HE in employment.

4.3. Communities of practice

Both YPs and CPs have set up or been involved in CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The data indicate Chinese students, particularly in Yorkshire, coalesce to

create small CoP, for example, according to their discipline or problem for coherent reasons to enable them to navigate successfully through their studies with support from fellow Chinese students. The less experienced, confident and knowledgeable students' memberships start as apprentices at the periphery and as their learning, confidence and skill acquisition develop in an interactive participatory framework their membership traverses to the core. The more experienced students with higher levels of expertise (masters of the community) also continue to learn as a direct result of participating within the community as a member (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

As they engage in these communities, it reinforces their identities as Chinese students in an international setting (within the Inner Circle). Simultaneously, they use their membership in CoP as strategies to adapt into their new environments, to the extent that it impacts on the programs they select. They appear to choose modules, even changing their degree option, once they discover that they will be better positioned to receive "support" if the degree or module they specify contain Chinese students (from the Expanding Circle).

> *Actually, it is convenient to choose a similar timetable . . . more efficient otherwise it can be difficult.* (YP 2)
>
> *In fact we work with Chinese students. It is easier as we can speak Chinese. It is more efficient.* (YP 4)
>
> *I thought I was the only who changed their discipline but there are other students with similar experience as me both Chinese and foreign* [non-UK] *students.* (YP 6)

YP 2 and YP 4 feel that classes with fellow Chinese students are "more efficient." This seems to suggest that it constitutes good learning practice to have access to CoP that have a range of functions beyond the purely academic, as members' experiences will entail similar challenges (e.g., linguistic and cultural) and will be able to provide mutual support and a social network.

> *No allowances in department for students whose first language is not English. I check with my classmates – mostly Chinese and some foreign* [non-UK] *students.* (YP 6)
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> *Tutor not always clear and makes assumptions we know this knowledge – are familiar with the concepts in English. We* [Chinese students] *spend time checking together.* (YP 5)
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> *Chinese students sit together to help each other as some content of lecture is difficult to understand . . . we speak after the lecture.* (YP 2)
>
> *As a foreigner we have to do much more than UK students. No problem with the subject – it's the language. After class we* [Chinese students] *work together.* (YP 3)
>
> *Chinese students sit together . . . live nearby and it is very convenient after class.* (YP 4)

It appears the YPs are much more focused on their difference from the UK students and are more community-oriented in their language. They also experience linguistic difficulties and rely on each other for support. This highlights YPs' experiences are similar and there is a sense of solidarity and mutual support which they gain from their CoP. This social co-participation where discussions are highly interactive engages students of all levels. Learning is a social practice and Wenger's (1998) CoP are about learning, knowledge and active engagement in the world, and ultimately this learning produces meaning. They are integral in enabling students to transition and transform as they weave through their various (or may be only one) CoP.

The finding that Chinese students deliberately seek study programs where fellow Chinese students are studying is significant. As it is generally understood and observed anecdotally in HE, the Chinese students' and the institutions' views and preferences have been to avoid having a surfeit of students of one nationality in one study program. However, there seems to be contradictory agendas in play suggesting that, even though the participants may be highly individualistic, for example, very competitive, there is a need for supportive CoP, particularly while they are operating in the Inner Circle, as membership enables opportunities to progress from "an apprentice" to "a master" more readily. Chen and Ross (2015) evince how Chinese "enclaves" in an American institution confirm ethnic identity and how through these discourse communities and networks there are opportunities to find support for economic and academic success. Paradoxically, they diminish the archetypical narrative that crossing borders for education enables an enriching global and international experience when Chinese students spend considerable time together in their national groups trying to cope with their studies.

In the Chengdu context, CoP are more academic in nature – they evolve to enable students to improve their academic skills and/or increase their knowledge; they are mainly concerned with classroom and/or study activities. As in Yorkshire, they arose in response to their situation, and the fundamental structural components of participation and individual engagement are contextual and embedded within their social and physical environments. One of the primary problems is that participants appear to have a need of support from fellow Chinese students when pedagogical interaction that takes place be it in the classroom, seminar or lecture (Johnson, 2008; Wang, Sun, & Liu, 2010). Participants have indicated the language that is used by tutors in these interactions is not always easy to follow or understand, which echoes YPs' (see also responses from YP 2, 3, 5 & 6 above) experiences.

Learning in Chinese is better as I understand teachers. It is an effort to learn in English. (CP 5)

We learn concepts not learnt in High School. Vocabulary is difficult . . . maybe I don't know their usage . . . will check with my classmates. (CP 1)

Linguistic difficulties, particularly the interaction that takes place between the tutor and the class, are typically problematic for international students including intercultural communication anxieties (Wang et al., 2010). Levels of anxiety can impede successful learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Both YPs and CPs rely on affective and social coping strategies such as support from fellow students and over time they are able to transition into confident individuals who are able to deal with these challenging linguistic issues. Studies show that these struggles in the classroom can ultimately impact students positively as they become aware of their transition from a student into a professional and develop their autonomy (Gu, 2015; Wu et al., 2015).

5. Discussion

After the analysis of data into themes, the general findings that have emerged are surprisingly similar across both the L1 and L2 sites, albeit different in nuance, in contrast to the initial assumption underlying this study. The similarities concern how the Yorkshire and Chengdu participants' view their identity as being dominantly Chinese with links to internationalization being desirable but not altering their core identity; social groups form to assist adaptation into the EMI environment and serve as a valuable support mechanism. The participants in both learning environments perceive their identity to be primarily Chinese (national and/or cultural) and they view themselves as purchasing a commodity – HE via EMI – which will enable them to claim some level of internationalism and to be deployed advantageously in the knowledge-based economy, in both the Inner and Expanding Circles. Moreover, they are able to navigate through their HE by the support of fellow Chinese students, with their skills and knowledge development, through membership in academic CoP. They acknowledge as they transition through their studies that their perspectives are becoming more "outward looking" and their cognition is impacted positively by exposure to EMI, despite linguistic and cultural tensions. The participants recognize, literally or metaphorically, crossing borders for education is transformative. However, throughout their studies, there is no expectation for these participants that their learning experiences will transition them away from perceiving themselves as Chinese or being perceived by the Other as anything other than Chinese, even though their identities will continue to be fluid and multi-dimensional whichever space they inhabit.

In respect to linguistic difficulties, the CPs had particular problems in understanding lectures and communicating with their tutors. Conversely, YPs encountered language problems interacting not only with their tutors, but also with their fellow students in the host country.

In sum, it appears that

- the impact of their study experiences on both the YPs' and CPs' perception of self has occurred to some extent;
- regardless of the L1 or L2 learning environments, the participants in this small data set are experiencing remarkably similar issues with respect to themes of identity, internationalization and CoP;
- their sense of identity as they experience EAP/EMI study is strong and multi-dimensional as it embodies a heightened sense of being Chinese; access to academic discourse CoP is requisite to further validate their sense of self.

It could be argued that the similarities between their learning experiences and identity are more nuanced. Nevertheless, accessing HE through EMI/EAP (regardless where it is positioned – Inner or Expanding Circles) enable Chinese students to progress on to the next stage of their lives enabling them to be viewed as an international engineer and operate successfully in the Expanding Circle as well as in the Inner Circle, if/when opportunities arise. The ability to operate in both or either of these "circles" in English enhances the students' linguistic, symbolic and social capital which impacts on their identities as well as social standing in their home communities.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated two groups of Chinese students' learning experiences in EAP/EMI in Chengdu and Yorkshire and showed students adapted to their EMI environment despite the barriers they experienced. It highlighted that global learners are complex and nuanced social beings whose identities are multi-dimensional, fluid and dynamic and who engage with CoP in unanticipated ways drawing on diverse types of social capital. Importantly, the study shows how English represents a vital source of linguistic capital which learners perceive as promising access to global economic resources and opportunities. Instead of threatening their national identities, the use of English appears to add an "international identity" which does not appear to challenge their "Chinese" identity but is incorporated into their multiple and fluid set of identities.

The study has some limitations, particularly its small sample size and issues surrounding the detail and depth of responses. Future studies might generate richer data if they are conducted in the participants' L1 or conducted in individual interview formats.

Nevertheless, the study revealed how the participants at the L1 and the L2 sites reported on remarkably similar learning experiences where they also met similar challenges and tensions regarding identity, transition, internationalization, and participation in CoP. This has interesting implications on crossing borders for education in the L2 environment when the experiences of EMI in the L1 environment are not too dissimilar to learning in a L2 setting. If this is the case, then there would be wider implications, for example financial for both the student and the institution as well as in terms of the kind of preparation and support learners may need to negotiate this transition. While preparation programs for study abroad are relatively widespread, they remain relatively uncommon in respect to EMI in HE in L2 settings. This study has also indicated that it may not be necessary to physically cross into the Inner Circle from the Expanding Circle to experience the notion of having an "international" identity.

It could be claimed that the generally held assumption and the archetypal narrative that crossing borders for study enables a more enriching experience with regards to internationalization, global outlook and general overall study experience has been dented. This research has found the overseas study experience is not vastly different from the experience of EMI in the home country, despite the different degrees of English language exposure. Both learning environments offer generally similar transitions and transformation experiences concerning identity and development of self. Perhaps internationalization and the acquisition of linguistic capital can happen for learners in diverse ways, not only through a study abroad experience.

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