Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Students’ Learning Thai Language Online in the Post-Pandemic Era—A Case Study of the Sino-Thai Co-operation Program at Guangxi University of Foreign Language

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Based on the theory of intercultural adaptation, this paper analyses the intercultural adaptation of Chinese students learning Thai language online in the post-pandemic period from two aspects: the process of intercultural adaptation of Chinese students and the dimension of cultural differences between Chinese and Thai teachers and students with the aim to provide countermeasures to improve the intercultural adaptation of Chinese students learning Thai language online. By avoiding or reducing misunderstandings and conflicts in the intercultural process of Chinese students, this paper aims to improve the effectiveness of cross-cultural online learning of Thai language.

Keywords: post-pandemic, Sino-Thai cooperative education, cross-cultural adaptation ability

The Sino-Thai University Co-operation Program is an educational and teaching activity between Chinese universities and Thai universities involving different disciplines, qualifications, majors, and courses, without the establishment of educational institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented Chinese students from studying in Thailand, but it has also accelerated the deep integration of modern information technology and higher education, resulting in a new form of education called “online teaching”, which has pushed through the physical limitations of educational exchange and cooperation between Chinese and Thai universities and achieved the purpose of cooperation in introducing excellent education resources from abroad. This enables the Chinese students to gain Thai educational experience and cultural knowledge without leaving China and reduce the cost of study compared to studying in Thailand at their own expense.

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Guangxi University of Foreign Language signed a memorandum of cooperation with a number of Thai universities. In the context of ongoing pandemic, the Chinese and Thai universities insisted on “seeking innovation and breakthrough” in the construction of a platform for educational cooperation and exchange in order to achieve “teaching and learning when offline classes were suspended”. Under the new trend of “online teaching”, the design and implementation of training programs to improve the cross-cultural adaptation ability of Chinese students learning Thai language online is the key to the sustainable development of the Sino-Thai cooperation program.

Therefore, this paper takes the Chinese students in the Sino-Thai University Co-operative Program as the research object, and explores in depth their cross-cultural adaptation process and the dimensions of cultural differences between Chinese and Thai teachers and students to come up with countermeasures to promote the cross-cultural adaptation ability of Chinese students learning Thai language online. This will help Chinese students effectively cushion the impact of the pandemic and maximize their access to quality Thai language and cultural resources in online learning, thus improving the quality of the Sino-Thai University Co-operative Program and promoting the healthy and sustainable development of the Sino-Thai co-operative programs.

Sample Selection and Research Methodology

To learn the cross-cultural adaptation status of students in the Sino-Thai University Co-operation Program, this paper adopts the methods of “participatory” observation, questionnaire survey, and in-depth interview.

Sample Selection

In this paper, a sample of 64 Chinese students majoring in Thai language in the class of 2019 was selected from the “2+2” program between Guangxi University of Foreign Language and Thai universities, of which 34 students were enrolled in the program at Chong Sheng University, Hua Qiao, Thailand and 32 students in the program at Northern University, Bangkok, Thailand, for a follow-up survey for one academic year, i.e. from September 2021 to July 2022.

Participatory Observation in the Classroom

As the head teacher of the Chinese students in the “2+2” program and the management teacher responsible for contact with Thai universities, the author is familiar with the students’ personalities and basic Thai language skills and a thorough understanding of the cooperation between the Chinese and Thai universities. At the same time, the author was involved in all the online teaching sessions with the Thai universities, and listened to all the classes and recorded all the online lessons. The involvement and material collected enables the author to conduct repeated review and in-depth analysis of all the details.

Questionnaire Survey and In-depth Interviews

The questionnaire survey was distributed to all 64 students to learn and grasp the adaptation status of students in the Sino-Thai cooperation program as a whole, and the results were quantitatively analyzed to formulate an interview outline. Later, in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 15 students to analyze in detail the intercultural adaptation problems and the influencing factors of the students. Finally, based on the findings of previous processes, the theoretical framework of cross-cultural adaptation is combined with the application of cross-cultural adaptation to propose specific countermeasures and suggestions for students’ cross-cultural adaptation in the Sino-Thai University Co-operation Program.
Process of Intercultural Adaptation for Chinese Students Studying Online in the Sino-Thai University Co-operation Program

Cross-cultural adaptation is a complex and dynamic process. In this paper, the authors refer to the four stages of cross-cultural adaptation described by the Lysgaard U-curve, namely the honeymoon period, the shock period, the adjustment period, and the adaptation period, and use them to analyze the process of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students’ online learning in the Sino-Thai University Co-operation Program. Detailed analysis is presented as follows.

The Honeymoon Period of Short-Lived Excitement

Chinese students will experience a short and pleasant honeymoon stage of one to two weeks at the beginning of the online course, during which they will feel curious about the teaching style of the Thai teachers and present a positive attitude toward online courses. However, as the initial experience of being exposed to Thai classes is very short, the excitement is not so profound that many students go straight past the “honeymoon period”, feeling more nervous and anxious and expressing concerns and worries about their language barrier due to their weak language foundation, and worrying that their limited language skills will not enable them to keep up with the course progress and they were worried that they would not be able to keep up with the course and complete their course tasks on time. They also felt confused and challenged by the uncertainty of the online course, and by the fact that they were able to learn the Thai language and culture through the internet, which was a unique opportunity to improve themselves.

Shock Period Filled With Negative Anxiety

After taking online course for a period of time, Chinese students have more and more contact with Thai teachers and find that many of the rules of the Thai curriculum are not the same as their familiar teaching methods in China. Finding that the actual learning experience and difficulty is greatly different from expectation, many students are filled with negative emotions. Some even want to withdraw from the online learning environment and return to their traditional Chinese classroom. This is mainly reflected in two aspects:

**Time arrangement.** The pace of learning in Thai universities is relatively more compact compared to Chinese universities, which makes Chinese students stressful and feel tired and hard to cope. For example, Chinese students can take a 10 minutes break for each class lasting for 45 minutes while the Thai universities tend to arrange classes for three hours in a row with breaks designated by the course teacher at will. Chinese students take a lunch break of about 2.5 hours, but Thai lunch breaks are only one hour. In addition, the Thai teachers do not take lunch breaks, so Chinese students still have to attend Thai online classes during their customary lunch breaks.

**Teaching style.** Thai university classes tend to be active and the classes are a kind of teacher-student cooperation. Chinese students are used to a more homogeneous classroom environment in China, so it is difficult for them to adapt to a more interactive classroom and it is difficult for them to change their learning style. In terms of final exams, Chinese students are used to paper exams and might perform unsatisfactorily in the cooperation programs that emphasize the multi-dimension evaluation. This makes Chinese students feel the gap and creates a sense of anxiety.

In addition, the limited Thai language skills of Chinese students make online learning difficult and affect their communication with Thai teachers, resulting in failure to keep up with their studies or complete their tasks. They begin to have a negative impression of the Thai teacher and the tasks assigned to them, and develop a
certain amount of internal resistance. Individual students appear to be playing with their mobile phones in class or not completing assignments on time and to the required standard.

**Adjustment Period Featuring Gradual Improvement**

After one semester, the online learning slowly gets back on the track; Chinese students feel less uncomfortable with different culture and gradually accept and get used to the Thai teachers’ online teaching model, which makes the communication between Chinese students and Thai teachers smoother and more effective. Chinese students’ language comprehension ability improves greatly. Chinese students become aware of the cultural differences between China and Thailand and try to be open to Thai teaching. They gradually accept or get used to the online learning environment used to make them feel anxious and try to actively conduct online interaction more with different Thais in order to adjust themselves to the Thai language environment. Chinese students are accustomed to the teaching time arrangement and assessment methods and are able to quickly receive the learning information from the Thai teachers and to do group pre-study, presentation, and revision according to the assigned classroom tasks. As their online learning efficiency improved, the Chinese students also received positive praise and feedback from their Thai teachers, which helped them to gain confidence in their learning and to actively express their personal views and opinions in class. As the Chinese students feel more confident in their ability to cope with new learning environment, their feelings of disappointment and anxiety diminish and they feel that “everything is gradually getting better”.

**The Calm and Pleasant Adaptation Period**

After one academic year of online learning, with the gradual increase in the number of online Thai courses, Chinese students have more communication with their Thai teachers and have gained a deeper understanding of online learning. They are willing to adapt their learning style to the Thai teachers’ teaching model and thus establish a relaxed and enjoyable teacher-student relationship with the Thai teachers. They develop a favor for the free and flexible way of teaching in Thailand. This makes the Chinese students become increasingly fond of Thai culture and taking pride in learning Thai language and Thai culture. Some Chinese students have extended their learning of Thai culture beyond the classroom by exchanging knowledge with their Thai friends through social media, such as using HelloTalk, Facebook, and WeChat, to create a Thai cultural learning and living environment. All in all, at this stage, Chinese students are able to learn successfully in an online learning environment and adapt satisfactorily to a new way of learning, with the feeling that “everything is pleasant”.

**Dimensions of Cultural Differences in Online Teaching Between Chinese and Thai Teachers and Students**

The core focus of studying the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students in online learning is to analyze and compare the similarities and differences between Chinese and Thai cultures. In this paper, the authors choose to analyze the cultural difference theoretical framework with reference to Edward T. Hall and Geert Hofstede to clarify the characteristics and differences of the cultures of Chinese and Thai teachers and students. This will help Chinese students to better adapt to cross-cultural situations and avoid unnecessary communicative misunderstandings, thus improving the effectiveness of online learning.

**High Context vs. Low Context**

The degree to which context affects the understanding of meaning varies from culture to culture. High context culture is characterized by ambiguity, often expressing information euphemistically and leaving it to
the other person to figure out what it means, always assuming that the other person should know what they want to say without being specific. In contrast, low-context cultures reveal their meaning in a straightforward manner, without beating around the bush, and any message must be clearly expressed through words.

In this study, it was found that both Chinese students and Thai teachers favored high context culture during the online lessons in the Sino-Thai cooperation program, as both cultures have a tradition of guiding people to use euphemisms and not to be too direct. Both cultures believe it is more important to maintain social harmony to prevent conflict with others than to state the purpose directly. Therefore, the respect for teachers in both Chinese and Thai cultures makes Chinese students more polite in their language and more cautious in their behavior when speaking to Thai teachers, often expressing themselves through subtle behavioral information or contextual clues such as facial expressions or voice intonation, many of which they do not dare to express directly and clearly through language, often placing the message in a communicative context and tentatively allowing the Thai teachers to guess the intentions. For example, when a Thai teacher assigns homework, Chinese students do not dare to express their opinions directly when they think that the homework is too heavy, but rather they are silent or frown at it. Only when the Thai teacher asks how long they can finish it before, the Chinese students politely express their need for an appropriate extension. Thus, in the actual online learning process, the Chinese students’ high-context behavior of not providing sufficient and necessary information directly baffles the Thai teacher to the extent that they are misinterpreted by the Thai teacher as inattentive, inattentive, or lack of courage, or even disrespectful, which in turn results in communicative misunderstandings.

**Monochronic Time Culture vs. Polychronic Time Culture**

When interacting across cultures, people from different cultures have different attitudes towards and ways of dealing with time. People from a polychronic culture believe that time is flexible and changeable and that it is understandable that several things can be done at the same time and changed according to the situation, while people from a monochronic time culture believe that time is linear and orderly ranged and that it is only natural to do one thing at a time and complete it on time and in the right amount.

In this study, it was found that Chinese and Thai teachers and students differed in their cultural view of time, with Chinese students belonging to a monochronic time culture while the Thai teachers belonging to a polychronic culture. This is reflected in the fact that Chinese students have a strong awareness of punctuality and are accustomed to it, and they consciously observe the class time. Chinese students tend to follow the time arrangement strictly and seldom vary the course schedule which might require a complex approval process for any change. In contrast, Thai teachers follow a polychronic culture and take a much more casual and flexible approach to class time. Although most Thai teachers are punctual, some may change their lesson times at short notice to inform students of the change without having to apply to the school in advance. Classes may end earlier or later depending on the completion of the content.

As a result, Chinese and Thai teachers and students do not share the same view of time in the online Thai language courses in the Sino-Thai Co-operation Program. Chinese students might be annoyed by the short-noticed change of lesson time by the Thai teacher, confused by the unexpected early closure of the lesson, and sometimes frustrated by the delay in the end of the lesson, which may mess up other schedules after the lesson. This shows that the difference in the time dimension between Chinese students and Thai teachers, and the difference in the cultural dimension of time between Chinese and Thai teachers and students create certain obstacles to Chinese students’ cross-cultural adaptation to learning Thai language online.
**High Power Distance vs. Low Power Distance**

Power distance is used to indicate the degree to which people accept the fact that power is unequally distributed in organizations. The greater the power distance, the greater inequality in the distribution of power in society. Under the cultural dimension of power distance, the inequality of power between teachers and students in the Sino-Thai cooperation program is mainly reflected in the fact that Thai teachers, as powerful members, have more power, while Chinese students, as weaker members, are in a dominated position by the powerful. The power distance between Chinese students and Thai teachers is determined by the cultural power distance between the two countries, where the higher the power distance, the more students accept the unequal distribution of power, and vice versa.

It is found that when entering the live classroom, the Chinese exchange students are able to use Thai salutations correctly when communicating with their Thai teachers, such as greeting them with a salute and using personal pronouns to show respect when answering questions, as the Chinese students have already studied Thai language and culture for two years beforehand. In the classroom, when Chinese students have questions, they do not raise them directly with the Thai teacher in person, but send messages to the teacher via WeChat after the class, according to the personality of each subject teacher; individual Thai teachers will comment on Chinese students’ performance in class and their homework after the class, and give appropriate advice on students’ hair style and dress code. The microphone must be kept off during the lesson, except for answering questions, and any loud noises during the lesson will be considered disrespectful by Thai teachers.

By analyzing the teacher-student relationship in online teaching from the perspective of power distance, it can be seen that the high power distance between Chinese and Thai teachers and students may cause Chinese students to be in awe of their Thai teachers and afraid to express their personal opinions and views in class, which might affect the effectiveness of cross-cultural online teaching. An extremely high power distance will create an obvious subordinate relationship between the teachers and the students, making the students feel pressured by the teachers’ learning plan and reluctant or afraid to provide positive objections or constructive suggestions, which may affect their motivation to learn. Therefore, a good online teacher-student relationship, based on mutual respect and appropriate adjustment of the power distribution between teachers and students, can help students to get rid of the discomfort caused by cultural differences, effectively activate the learning atmosphere in the online classroom, stimulate Chinese students’ enthusiasm for learning Thai language and culture, and also stimulate the passion of Thai teachers to impart knowledge, in order to establish a harmonious online teaching teacher-student relationship.

**Strong Uncertainty Avoidance vs. Weak Uncertainty Avoidance Culture**

Uncertainty avoidance is the degree to which members of a society feel uncomfortable with things and situations that are uncertain, unfamiliar, or vague. A strong uncertainty avoidance culture prefers to have rules, standards, and procedures to guide their expressions and actions, and prefers to do everything by the book and not to change things on the fly. Weak uncertainty avoidance culture is more casual about rules, standards, etc., and believes in going with the flow, prefers random changes, and is more tolerant of unusual views and behavior.

The research finds that Chinese students belong to a strong uncertainty avoidance culture and are used to following the pattern taught by their teachers, learning in a step-by-step manner, with the teacher being the main instructor of knowledge, and everything being in order, and feeling uncomfortable or nervous if the rules
and patterns are broken. Thai teachers, however, tend to teach in a more task-based way, preferring to guide students in a self-directed way. Thai teachers assign project tasks and ask students to do independent learning by reading books and consulting literature, usually assigning students to work in groups to communicate and complete tasks. The students are required to give their personal opinions and views when presenting them in class, where students learn through active exploration and improve their creative thinking. This can leave Chinese students somewhat uncomfortable, anxious, or nervous when principles and rules are broken. Uncertainty avoidance is therefore an important factor in the process of intercultural communication between Chinese students and Thai teachers, because in actual intercultural communication, both Chinese students and Thai teachers from different cultural backgrounds cannot rely on the cultural norms and frames of reference that they are familiar with and use subconsciously. They can only reduce the uncertainty in communication by speculating on each other’s communicative behavior.

**Improve Chinese Students’ Intercultural Adaptation Skills in Learning Thai Language Online**

In order to address cross-cultural barriers, exercise Chinese students’ ability to actively communicate, help them overcome their fear of learning Thai language online, and improve their ability to communicate and cooperate across cultures, the following four aspects should be enhanced:

**Strengthen Chinese Students’ Thai Language Application Skills**

This study found that Chinese students’ limited Thai language proficiency is the biggest obstacle to cross-cultural adaptation. In order to strengthen Chinese students’ Thai language skills, the following four steps can be taken: Firstly, at the early stage of students’ enrolment, Chinese universities can strengthen the introduction and publicity of the “2+2” program, so that students can understand the program in advance, clarify their future learning goals, and build up a solid language foundation in a targeted manner. Secondly, in the first two years of the Thai language foundation course and the curriculum arrangement, on the basis of strengthening the students’ Thai language reading and writing abilities, the practical application of their listening and speaking skills shall be emphasized. The arrangement of Thai language corner, Thai language salon, and other second classroom forms shall be fully used to improve the overall Thai language ability of the students. Students are encouraged to learn independently, think dialectically, and master scientific and efficient learning methods, while cultivating teamwork and improving their Thai language application skills through practical sessions.

**Increase Chinese Students’ Knowledge of Thai Culture**

The educational cooperation department should offer specific courses on cross-cultural adaptation to help students understand the Thai institutions or universities they will be studying in and learn the faculty, the distribution of majors, the students, and even the living environment in the relevant cities, the background of the schools, the local economic development, and other relevant information, so as to reduce the gap between students’ own expectations and the actual situation and reduce cross-cultural adaptation difficulties. Secondly, regular online lectures or language and culture training courses with experts and scholars from Thailand will help students to get familiar with the Thai language and culture. Thirdly, students should be provided with management teachers who are familiar with the cultural differences between China and Thailand to help them with their lives and studies and to help them understand the training objectives, educational concepts, and
teaching systems of the partner institutions. In addition, the relevant departments of the Chinese school should liaise with the Thai institutions in time to understand the curriculum of the online study in advance, encourage students to get familiar with the relevant course content according to the curriculum, and help students to prevent the barrier of lack of cross-cultural language expression in advance, so that students can minimize cultural shock in the cross-cultural adaptation.

**Improve Chinese Students’ Intercultural Communication Skills**

This study finds that the majority of Chinese students often feel overwhelmed and need a long time to adjust to the cultural differences of their Thai teachers when studying online due to the lack of experience in contact, communication, and exchange with Thai people. In response to this lack of cross-cultural communication skills and the fact that students cannot study in Thailand due to the pandemic, Chinese universities should actively build bridges of communication between China and Thailand, make full use of online social platforms, such as WeChat, QQ, Facebook, and other online and social platforms familiar to Chinese students and Thai teachers, and conduct online networking activities with Thai institutions, so that Chinese students learning Thai language and Thai students learning Chinese can help each other to learn the language of the target country by “pairing up”. Both would quickly improve their language communication skills and better understand the culture of the other country, which will greatly help Chinese students to improve their intercultural communication skills. Chinese students are encouraged to use online tools to make friends with Thai people, so that they can compare cultural differences with each other and improve their intercultural communication skills by discovering the factors inherent in cultural differences. Through communication and exchange with Thai friends, students will be able to enhance their communicative skills in the context of cultural differences. Chinese universities can organize themed Thai language corners, international cultural festivals, and cross-cultural exchange activities such as exchange visits between Chinese and foreign students to provide students with direct cross-cultural experiences and develop their open and tolerant cross-cultural communication skills.

**Strengthen Chinese Students’ Cross-Cultural Psychological Adaptation**

The psychological adaptation of students in the intercultural process is an important factor that affects their learning effectiveness. Therefore, schools should strengthen the psychological development of Chinese students before they take online Thai language courses, and encourage them to face the new environment with an optimistic and positive attitude, to take the difficulties and setbacks they encounter in their online intercultural studies easy, and to face problems and solve them. At the same time, students are encouraged to develop their self-confidence, independence, motivation, initiative, and adaptability, and are guided to manage their emotions and regulate them in order to alleviate their negative emotions in intercultural communication. It is also important to set good psychological expectations before taking online Thai language courses, to have certain expectations of various cultural differences, to be tolerant of unfamiliar environments and to adjust their cross-cultural adaptation skills in a timely manner.

**Conclusion**

As a new model of the Sino-Thai University Co-operation Program, Chinese students learn Thai language online to improve their cross-cultural adaptation ability. In the process of promoting the sustainable development of the Sino-Thai University Co-operation Program and the effectiveness of the program results,
we should pay attention to the cross-cultural adaptation status of Chinese students and explore ways to improve their cross-cultural adaptation ability, so as to ensure the sound operation of the Sino-Thai University Co-operation Program.

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