

## Research Article

# International Chinese Postgraduate Students' Adaptation Strategies for Oral English Communication Practices in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

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Since establishing the Silk Road initiatives, increasing numbers of Chinese students are going to Malaysia to pursue their postgraduate degrees. As the largest group of international students, numerous research studies have reported that Chinese international postgraduate students face language obstacles in English language communication during their overseas studies in English-medium instruction (EMI) campuses. This qualitative case study supplies in-depth insight into different adaptation strategies utilized by international Chinese postgraduate students to overcome challenges faced in academic communication practices. Qualitative data were collected from three sessions of semistructured in-depth interviews. Informants were six international Chinese mainland postgraduate students (i.e., three masters' students, three Ph.D. students) from diverse disciplines. The interviews allowed the participants to share their own experiences of utilizing effective adaptation strategies to overcome challenges faced in academic English communication practices in their studies. Their adaptation strategies include enhancing their oral English language communication competence and academic achievement. Thus, this study contributes by providing suggestions to Malaysian higher education institutions seeking measures to improve international service quality.

## 1. Introduction

As has been reported by previous research, Malaysia, as an emerging international education hub, now attracts an increasing number of Chinese students to pursue degrees in its higher education institutions [1, 2]. With the current globalization and internationalization, transnational education cooperation among countries has increasingly grown with the mass fluency of international students [3]. Hence, the number of international students is a critical indicator in judging a country's globalization and economy. Having international students could help diversify culture and boost the economy. Meanwhile, international students can broaden their horizons and improve their degrees. So, both parties could benefit mutually [2]. As the largest group of international students [4] international Chinese EFL students' overseas studies should be emphasized to improve the

quality of international education services [5]. However, Zhai and Razali [6] reported that international Chinese EFL students face obstacles in English language communication. This review showcases 24 previous studies on English communication issues by Zhai and Razali [6]. The authors posited that previous studies focus mainly on western contexts of English communication challenges faced by international students, especially by Chinese mainland postgraduates. To fill this gap, this study focuses on Chinese students' oral English communication practice in a Malaysian public university.

Furthermore, the complexity and depth of communication skills in English are similar to the complexity and depth of internationalization. For international students to better their academic achievement, they need to master the basic English communication competence and make adequate preparations before studying abroad [6]. Therefore,

English communication education for international students studying in Malaysian higher education institutions should be prioritized [5].

Most higher education institutions in Malaysia use English as the teaching and learning medium [7, 8]. Furthermore, English is regarded as the second language in Malaysian society [9, 10]. Most Malaysians can speak English fluently as part of their academic studies and daily life activities. However, the English communicative competence of the majority of international EFL postgraduate students cannot meet the needs of their academic studies and daily life activities in Malaysia. Published research focusing on the Asian perspective in this field is scarce [5, 11], so a wide gap needs to be filled. This study aims at mitigating this problem.

This study aims at answering the following questions:

- (1) What strategies do international Chinese mainland postgraduate students use to overcome challenges in English language communication problems during their studies in Malaysian higher education institutions?
- (2) What strategies could be used by Malaysian higher education institutions to help this student cohort overcome challenges in English language communication during their overseas studies?

## 2. Literature Review

*2.1. English Communication Practices.* Students pursuing postgraduate degrees in an English-medium instruction (EMI) campus must be proficient in English oral communication as they have to present mini-lectures, participate in group discussions, and give presentations at conference meetings at the postgraduate level across multiple academic settings, such as in the classroom, when lecturing, and when teaching [12–14]. However, Zhai and Razali [6] reported that the majority of mainland Chinese students encounter numerous challenges in the English language (e.g., intercultural communication, insufficient discipline knowledge in the English language, unfamiliarity with the foreign country's education system) when they pursue postgraduate studies on the EMI campus. Therefore, this study proposes some practical strategies to solve English communication problems for these cohorts of international students.

### *2.2. Strategies to Solve English Communication Challenges*

*2.2.1. Intercultural Communication Curriculum Design.* Deriving from intercultural communication curriculum design perspectives, Zhai and Razali [5] showcase instructions for the implementation of intercultural communication competence teaching in indoor/outdoor classes by the application of Tik Tok based on five strategies to improve EFL learners' intercultural communication competence. The teaching plan can be divided into three major stages. The first stage, termed "position language," consists of communicative tasks, in which reflections of culture and language are intertwined. This plan should select appropriate communicative tasks considering the cultural content

limitations in the teaching material and students' hobbies. The authors divide the categories into four parts in the teaching material to develop cross-cultural communicative topics. The second stage, called "guide," teaches students to think interculturally, with discussions and comparisons between the mother culture and target culture based on the "inherent" knowledge combined with the activation of schema held among students for reflections of their own experiences and to judge their own opinions. The third stage is the "teaching method."

As Hoa and Vien [15] posited, interesting topics for class content can help stimulate students' awareness of learning cross-cultural knowledge. Engaging in real intercultural situations could also provide students the chance to practice interculturally communicative tasks to build new knowledge. They acquire this knowledge from intercultural occasions, along with the enhancement of their English communication abilities and their English progress in intercultural communication [5]. Therefore, an effective cross-cultural curriculum design is essential for EFL learners to acquire cross-cultural knowledge.

*2.3. Effective Measures of Host Institutions.* Considering the host institution's perspectives, Huang [16] posited that English centers in host countries should shoulder the responsibility to improve both the host lecturers' intercultural communication competence and the international students' oral academic English communication competence through expert communication knowledge training programs. Huang noticed the importance of financial investments in such programs to improve the world-class competitiveness of the host country's colleges and their attraction to international students. The author also mentioned the significance of teachers' English abilities, raising the concern of ensuring their teaching performance in EMI by providing requirements for teachers to have high English standards/levels or by offering language training opportunities to those who lack English abilities. This showcases the sustainable provision of language support, language training, and other types of language expertise assistance, which are necessary for quality assurance in EMI.

Meanwhile, Zhai and Razali [6] reported on the significance of academic advisers, who can guide international students about campus knowledge, academics, and social perspectives of the college. They also assist students to become actively engaged on campus by encouraging them to participate in numerous activities and supplying them with information on the resources they need. Nadeem et al. [17] state that advisers with vast culture-specific knowledge, intercultural sensitivity, and communication skills can create a comfortable, friendly, and productive work environment. As a result, international student advisers (ISAs) come from a variety of backgrounds, and higher educational institutions are now offering programs in international education and international student advising, while for decades, only a handful of programs provided expertise adviser services in this area [17, 18].

Specifically, Nadeem et al. [17] suggested that professionals with academic backgrounds in administration, education, international studies, foreign languages, and anthropology be recruited to help assist international students. Furthermore, with their vast knowledge of intercultural understanding, global student advisers may contact students from many cultures, religions, and languages with success. Meanwhile, the school authorities should hold training projects for ISAs to help improve their intercultural communicative expertise and competence [19].

**2.4. Prior Preparations in China.** In 2001, the Ministry of Education initially established the cultivation of “cultural awareness”; the target of this course now has become a significant component of the English curriculum standards, having received great attention from the education field [5]. Furthermore, Zhai and Razali [6] provided information about the intercultural communication method in China where most students are exposed to a project-based model based on the College English Course Teaching Requirements. The Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, of the People’s Republic of China has drafted educational materials emphasizing the significance of intercultural English language knowledge for tertiary English education in China.

Phan Le Ha [20] also showcased the methods to achieve this goal. First, teachers’ English intercultural communication proficiency should be improved and lecturers’ intercultural knowledge enriched, to give students high-quality English intercultural communication knowledge lectures. Second, more native lecturers need to be employed, more native students recruited, and more native volunteers invited to participate in the actual class in colleges, to help students gain more exposure to the authentic English communication context to help students practice more in reality. Third, Phan Le Ha suggested the flipped class model in oral English teaching to help improve students’ oral communicative competence. Fourth, students’ listening abilities need to be enhanced through repeated practice of their actual verbal English communication. That study also proposed the use of audiovisual instruments in intercultural English language classes to help enhance students’ intercultural communication competence for their advantage of involvement in the actual English communication situation.

**2.5. Theoretical Framework.** As outlined in Figure 1, the current research is guided by two theoretical approaches: communicative competency theory [21] and self-efficacy theory [22].

**2.5.1. Communicative Competence Theory.** Developed in 1966 by Hymes, communicative competence is regarded as a major social skill for speakers to become competent communicators in natural settings. In English education, this concept has been used for centuries as it has been developed by numerous linguists [21]. Moreover, Canale and Swain [21] introduced a conceptual model of communicative

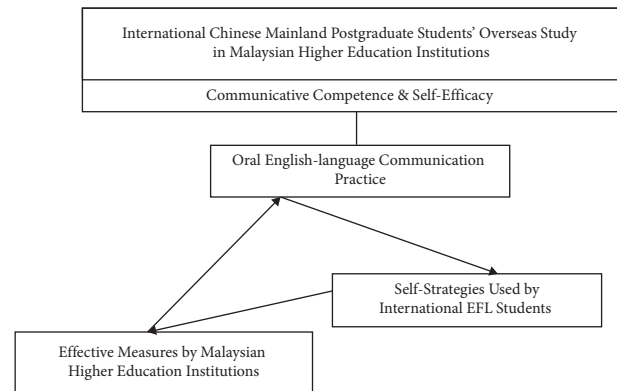


FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework based on communicative competence theory and self-efficacy theory.

competence, which is a set of four individual competencies: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discursive, and strategic.

**2.5.2. Self-Efficacy Theory.** Based on Bandura’s social cognitive theory, self-efficacy can be analyzed in terms of attitudes towards self-judged capabilities to reach a goal. In more specific terms, academic self-efficacy refers to the belief (conviction) that a person can attain a specified level of achievement in an academic task or achieve a targeted educational outcome [22]. Accordingly, students with high self-efficacy are likely to be more motivated to participate in their academic studies with diligence and perseverance to achieve success. Moreover, the student’s belief that he or she can accomplish academic requirements has an effect on emotions to lessen their psychological pressure. Those who do not realize their own academic improvement may experience less negative effects on their self-efficacy. They will become more self-confident and make academic progress and improvement at the same time.

In contrast to the familiar culture and teaching methods of their country, mainland Chinese students studying in EMI Malaysian colleges need academic adjustment skills and communication skills in oral English. Students should be prepared to adapt to a new culture when faced with different education systems, teaching methods, and educational evaluations when taking courses taught by foreign lecturers with distinctive teaching methods.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework based on two theories. With the communicative competence theory in conjunction with the self-efficacy theory, mainland Chinese students who are highly motivated to improve their oral academic English competence can surely enhance their oral communication competence efficiently. Moreover, effective measures implemented by host institutions can also contribute to the improvement of these students’ English proficiency.

### 3. Research Method

This article draws on material from a completed master’s dissertation on English language communication challenges among international Chinese mainland postgraduate

students in Malaysia. In this study, six mainland Chinese international students were treated as an individual case to gain a holistic understanding of mainland Chinese students' English communication experiences in Malaysian higher educational institutions [23].

**3.1. Research Participants.** The research setting of that study was a public research university in Malaysia, in which 5289 international students were enrolled at the time. That qualitative case study [23] utilized purposive sampling, aiming to select all possible participants who could offer correct and reliable information pertaining to the research questions [24]. The criteria for selecting international Chinese postgraduates for this study are research participants who (a) are full-time international postgraduate students in masters' or doctoral programs; (b) are all from mainland China; and (c) have stayed in Malaysia for at least 10 months. The six students (Table 1) voluntarily participated in this study. The researchers employed pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the six participants and the confidentiality of the data collected from the specific participant.

**3.2. Instruments for Data Collection.** The researchers used self-developed interview questions and protocols for data collection (e.g., validated by three TESL (teaching English as a second language) experts and revised by TESL colleagues). The semistructured interview questions were related to the research questions (e.g., strategies used to overcome English communication challenges). Appendix A presents these interview questions. The interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, Mandarin Chinese. The participants all gave their written consent and permission to record the interviews. The transcripts were checked by students and then translated into English by three experts fluent in both Mandarin Chinese and English.

**3.3. Procedures for Data Collection.** The researchers conducted this study following Seidman's [25] interview protocol. Three in-depth interview sessions (see Table 2) with six international Chinese postgraduates were conducted through Zoom meetings, with each session lasting for 50 minutes. The first interview session (i.e., Phase-one interview) was performed with each student-participant to gather their prior preparations in China before studying in Malaysian higher education institutions. After analyzing the data from the first session, the second interview session (i.e., Phase-two interview) was implemented with each student-participant in the middle of this research. This session of interviews was to gather strategies employed by students to help overcome difficulties in oral English academic communication in their studies in Malaysia. The third interview session (i.e., phase-3 interview) was conducted with every individual student-participant at the last phase of the investigation after the researchers analyzed the data from the first and the second sessions. This session of interviews was to collect the strategies employed by higher education

institutions (e.g., including China and Malaysia) that might use to overcome these challenges. All three discussions have been audio-recorded in a digital recorder confidentially. The first, second, and third interviews have been transcribed verbatim. The transcription procedure is also critical to data analysis so that the researchers can go through the textual data systematically.

**3.4. Data Analysis.** All sessions were audio-recorded by using a Zoom recorder confidentially. Verbatim transcripts were generated for in-depth analyses. A qualitative research data analysis tool, NVivo 12, which can be integrated with Microsoft Word, was used to create an organized and exploratory analysis of complex data and emergent patterns. For researchers, NVivo 12 is useful for transferring data efficiently between codes and documenting it as it is analyzed [26]. By using the software, the validity of the data was increased. Nowell et al.'s [27] six-step thematic analysis was used for data analyses. The researchers conducted data analysis in six phases, including familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating initial code sets, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up the findings [26]. We created three themes (see Table 3) across the dataset: (1) prior preparations in China; (2) strategies employed by students; and (3) strategies employed by higher education institutions.

## 4. Results

**4.1. Strategies to Solve Challenges to Academic English Communication.** In this section, we examine how international mainland Chinese postgraduate students cope with the challenges in their oral academic communication practices. The following adaptation strategies (see Table 4) are multifaceted, with students opting for different strategies to fit their expectations.

### 4.2. Prior Preparations in China

**4.2.1. Preparation of Subject-Related Knowledge in English Language.** When talking about the possible strategies to solve academic communication challenges, five of the six participants said that it is essential to prepare some subject content-related books in the English language in China before students continue their studies in Malaysia. The majority of books on the subject they acquired in China are in the Chinese language. Hence, they believe that by reading books in English, they can expand their subject knowledge in English, which can also help them gain access to Malaysian-English-medium lectures. Five of the six participants also informed the researcher that the significant challenges they faced during academic English communication were unfamiliar with the subject knowledge expressed in English. Five participants also stated that they sometimes know the theory in essence, but are limited by insufficient subject-related vocabulary in English to express their ideas effectively and accurately. Therefore, they believe that preparing by reading

TABLE 1: Participants' profiles.

Participant's name	Gender	Age	Degree level	Field of the study	Time in Malaysia (months)	IELTS score (speaking competence)	IELTS score (listening competence)
HY	Female	33	Ph.D.	Musician	10	5.5	6.5
KQ	Male	33	Ph.D.	Human resources	10	5.0	5.5
XZ	Female	33	Ph.D.	Mass communication	10	5.0	6.5
HC	Male	25	Master's (course-work)	Economics	10	5.0	5.5
MR Q	Male	26	Master's (course-work)	Corporate communication	10	5.0	5.0
ZZ	Female	26	Master of science	Water resources	10	5.5	5.0

TABLE 2: Data collection.

Phase	Theme	Time/3 times/six	Feedback	Transcription
One	Prior preparations in China	50 minutes each	1. We-chat message 2. Interview responses	Notes audio-recorder
Two	Strategies employed by students	50 minutes each	1. We-chat message 2. Interview responses	Notes audio-recorder
Three	Strategies employed by higher education institutions	50 minutes each	1. We-chat message 2. Interview responses	Notes audio-recorder

TABLE 3: Thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

Key themes	
1	Prior preparations in China
2	Strategies employed by students
3	Strategies employed by higher education institutions

TABLE 4: Adaptation strategies for overcoming the challenges in oral English academic communication practices.

Adaptation strategies for overcoming the challenges in oral English academic communication practices
1. Prior preparations in China
2. Strategies employed by students
3. Strategies employed by higher education institutions

issue content-related books in English is beneficial for studying in an EMI learning institution.

*“It is essential to do prior readings in subject content-related books in the English language. Because I think the knowledge is similar, the obstacle for oral academic communication is the unfamiliar medium-English language. Before this, I have only earned these subjects in the Chinese language. So, now I think it is beneficial to read some books in the English language to better oral academic English communication.”-ZZ, August 23, 2020.*

4.2.2. *Preparation for Malaysian Accent in English Communication.* Five of the six participants also suggested to the researcher that it might be better for them to watch Malaysian-English movies or online courses held by Malaysian lecturers before coming to Malaysia to get used to and practice their listening competence in the Malaysian-English accent and Malaysian-English expressions. All six participants said that

they find it hard to understand some lecturers' English with a solid Malaysian accent. They lamented that most of the listening material in Chinese English classrooms is in standard English. English education in China emphasizes listening to common English language spoken by native speakers, which might not be accurate to actual social contexts. So, the majority of Chinese English learners also lack meaningful and authentic English communication contexts practiced in real-life situations. Therefore, performing listening activities to become familiar with the Malaysian-English accent can help students adapt to the Malaysian-English-medium lectures quickly and effectively. They also reported that some Malaysian expressions of the English language are highly localized as opposed to the standard English linguistic rules. Therefore, they think it is better to do some prior learning in Malaysian-English expressions.

*“I found it interesting that Malaysians have unique ways of using the English language, different from standard English linguistic rules and grammar. And I also found it hard to listen to some lecturers' English with solid accents. So it might be better to watch some Malaysian-English movies or watch some online courses held by Malaysian lecturers. But I must admit that they are very confident and fluent in speaking English, even with a solid accent.”-XZ, August 24, 2020.*

*“I found they have some Malaysian special-flavor English. They use some Malaysian local expressions differing from everyday English words. I think it is better to do some preparations in watching some Malaysian-English movies to adapt to their accent and be familiar with their unique expressions.”-MRQ, August 24, 2020.*

4.2.3. *Preparation for Malaysian Teaching and Learning Approaches.* Six participants suggested that it is helpful to prepare for adaptations to Malaysian classroom teaching

and learning approaches that are different from those in China. Before coming to study in a Malaysian classroom, students should know the rules of the Malaysian classroom. Unlike traditional Chinese classrooms, Malaysian classrooms emphasize student-centered learning, which allows students to play an important role in the classroom. Apart from being the primary person to disseminate knowledge, Malaysian lecturers play the role of facilitators in classrooms. Collaborative activities, verbal discussions, group work, and English oral presentations are major teaching activities in Malaysian classrooms. The notion is that the greater the chances of verbal discussions students have in diverse cultural groups, the higher their level of oral English communication will be. In this regard, five of the six participants suggested that international Chinese students should master group socialization skills by participating in diverse cultural groups to help them integrate with international students to generate greater chances of oral academic English communication.

*“Malaysian classrooms for postgraduate students are different from those in China. Too many collaborative vocal activities, group discussions, and verbal participation make me feel a little uncomfortable. Because I used to keep silent and take notes without verbal participation in my traditional Chinese classrooms. Mainly, I think social skills are essential for future students when facing finding groups. If you have some social skills, it will be better to integrate yourself with the students from different parts of the world. Participating in diverse cultural background groups will help you improve your oral academic English competence quickly.”*-HC, 25, August 2020.

*“There are many verbal presentations via the English language in Malaysian classrooms. I think it will be better for me to master some English public speaking skills before studying here. Learning basic English public speaking skills can help build up my presentation confidence when speaking English in front of my classmates.”*-HY, 25, August 2020.

Furthermore, five participants mentioned that one of the obstacles to their oral academic English communication is their unfamiliarity with the Malaysian classroom setting, such as the classroom seating arrangements and the lack of technological advancement in most university classrooms. They all pointed out the significance of knowing about Malaysian classroom situations. They think that future students can consult with seniors who have been to Malaysia or are currently learning in Malaysia to obtain information on the conditions of Malaysian classrooms to make complete preparations.

*“It is essential to know more about Malaysian classrooms before coming to Malaysia. It will help reduce the anxiety of studying in an unfamiliar context. The more basic standard information of Malaysian classrooms you know, the more quickly you adapt to Malaysian academic studies.”*-ZZ, 25, August 2020.

**4.2.4. Undergoing Oral Academic English Training.** All six participants hoped that the host universities could hold English language oral academic training to improve their communication competence, such as Academic English Communication Skills with Supervisors, English Communication Skills with Colleagues from Other Countries, and English Verbal Skills in Classrooms. They strongly desire that the host universities hold oral educational communication training activities for both the international Chinese students and their own lecturers to improve the learning outcomes for these students.

Five of the six participants informed the researcher that they would attend the universities' oral academic English training courses even if they had to pay fees. They hoped to improve their oral academic communication competence for their academic intellect and academic achievement. They wanted a chance to learn and practice their oral English in an actual scholarly communication context. In addition, four of the six participants hoped that the universities could provide practical English communication competence training for the host universities' lecturers free of charge in the future to better their teaching outcomes. This is because some lecturers are not good at oral English communication with international students.

*“I hope our university could hold some academic English communication training programs for international Chinese students. This can help us improve our academic oral English communication competence effectively and precisely. I can accept some courses with fees to pay. If it is valid, I think it is reasonable to be paid.”*-HY, 26, August 2020.

*“I hope our university can supply some oral English training programs at a specific time for some lecturers with a strong accent to help improve learning outcomes for international students from other parts of the world.”*-KQ, 26, August 2020.

**4.2.5. Measures in Avoiding Prejudice.** All six participants of this research posited that they had met some lecturers with prejudice towards international Chinese students. They felt extremely disappointed with these lecturers' impolite and irresponsible behaviors, and hoped that the host university could take measures to avoid these conditions. Five of the six participants stated that some lecturers of this university refused to give them in-depth academic guidance if they wanted to ask them theoretical questions after class. They informed the researcher that they hoped to have equal rights as the local students to have oral academic English communication chances with their lecturers and were treated equally with no personal bias. This is because these lecturers refused to give foreign students equal verbal scholarly English communication opportunities that they give to local Malaysian students. They hoped that the university could take measures to solve these issues by providing proper channels to file complaints and punish irresponsible lecturers. Further, they hoped the host university would hold

training programs for lecturers to help them develop the sense of being open-minded and kind to international students.

*“I am fortunate because I am in the Business Department. Many international Chinese students are in this department, so most of my lecturers are equal and kindhearted to our Chinese international students. But my friends in other departments do not have the same luck as me. One of my friends told me with tears in her eyes; she had been unequally treated in one lecture. She asked the lecturer academic questions; that lecturer refused to give her answers in class. She felt unfortunate. That lecturer is impolite. I cannot understand the lecturers’ behavior. We all share the fees to the campus; why should we be treated unequally? I hope the university could take some effective measures to let the lecturers be open-minded and kindhearted to our international students to help this university become a real world-class university with an open-minded campus culture. But it cannot be denied that most lecturers are kindhearted and open-minded.”*-HC, August 28, 2020.

**4.3. Providing English Communication Activities.** All six participants hoped that the host universities would hold academic communication activities in the English language to help improve their chances of speaking English in actual educational settings, as well as exercises to increase their chances of communicating with global counterparts and local students. Five participants were eager to engage in intercultural activities or trans-subject communication in the English language with their peers from other countries, to broaden their horizons and make new friends. As the majority of international Chinese students lack confidence and courage to communicate actively with their colleagues from other parts of the world, they mainly communicate in Mandarin with their Chinese friends, which impedes their progress in oral English communication competence.

*“I am shy to communicate with students from other countries. But I want to share with my colleagues from different parts of the world, and I want to know a different culture, lifestyle, and perspectives of thinking about this world. I want to communicate with different accents-English to improve my listening comprehension and English speaking competence. So I hope the host university can hold some English communication activities to supply the platform for both local and international students to communicate with each other to broaden both parties’ horizons and make friends worldwide.”*-XZ, August 29, 2020.

**4.4. Equipping Oneself with Self-Learning Methods.** All six participants believed that the most effective strategy to improve English academic oral communication competence is to engage in self-motivation and equip themselves by using self-learning methods. This is because they think that postgraduate students’ academic achievements depend

mainly on their learning motivations and the world is now a digital world with free learning resources online.

All six participants told the researcher that they have the habit of watching English movies, listening to English songs, or listening to the BBC and VOA to improve their speaking and listening comprehension competence in their daily overseas study lives. These students stated that it is also good to watch Malaysian-English movies or TV series to familiarize themselves with the Malaysian-English accent and Malaysian culture. Furthermore, they read after the native-English speakers when listening to exciting videos and sometimes imitated the speakers’ pronunciation to improve their own. These strategies can help students become familiar with English in virtual and real-life settings communication settings. All the English language they have learned before is mainly from textbooks, so they need to learn how to use it practically.

Five of the six participants watched TED-talk videos every week to learn English oral communication skills and develop their critical thinking style. As they lacked English vocabulary, English expressions, and essential thinking ability, they found that critical thinking ability plays a crucial role in their overseas academic studies and research. As postgraduate students, they need to write a thesis or dissertations, for which they need to find research gaps. Critical thinking ability is the core thinking competence in this form of writing. Meanwhile, further academic English communication requires essential thinking and English communication skills.

Four of the six research participants said that they participated in different seminars and workshops held by lecturers of this university to improve their speaking and listening comprehension. They sometimes audited lectures to improve their academic English speaking and listening competence to become familiar with different kinds of English accents. Meanwhile, three participants informed the researcher that they joined social media groups to improve their English communication competence. Such learning groups usually include native-English speakers and non-native-English speakers. Nonnative-English speakers can find a verbal-practice partner from native-English-speaking countries to improve their English communication skills.

*“I participated in many seminars and workshops to improve my English listening comprehension. Meanwhile, I also try to grasp every possible chance to speak with people from different parts of the world in the English language to improve my English communication competence with other accents of the English language. I also watch some English movies, listen to some English songs to improve my English listening competence.”*-KQ, August 30, 2020.

*“I participated in some English communication learning social media groups to improve my communication competence. I find a verbal-practice partner from America. And we have become good friends now. He helps me improve my English communication competence; I strengthen his Mandarin communication competence. We help each other and learn from each other.”*-MRQ, August 30, 2020.

## 5. Discussion

This research investigated the adaptation strategies that international Chinese postgraduate students employed to overcome challenges in oral English language communication. The participants were required to answer the semi-structured interview questions to discover their possible strategies during postgraduate studies in Malaysian higher education institutions. Consequently, we found these strategies to be prior preparations in China (e.g., preparation for subject content-related knowledge in English, preparation for Malaysian teaching and learning approaches), undergoing oral academic English training, measures in avoiding prejudice, provision of English communication activities by host institutions, and equipping themselves with self-learning methods. Based on the current findings, we suggest that the recent research provides practical solutions to the academic oral English communication challenges that mainland Chinese students face at the EMI campus [28]. In addition, this study fills the research gap in the existing literature, for example, Refs. [5, 6, 18, 29], which identifies the lack of studies concerning mainland Chinese students' English oral communication experiences in ASEAN countries. According to our understanding, research on EFL students' academic oral English communication experiences in ASEAN countries is a relatively new research area that contributes to the core theoretical development of communicative competence [30].

First, we found that mainland Chinese postgraduate students should make prior preparations in China (e.g., preparation for subject content-related knowledge in the English language, preparation for Malaysian teaching, and learning approaches). This is essential to improve their academic English communication competence prior to their literary adaptations to Malaysian higher education institutions [30, 31]. Similarly, earlier research by Craig [32] argued that discipline knowledge of the English language played a significant role in academic oral English communication. This indicates that such student cohorts are suggested to strengthen their subject-related knowledge in English before they commence their higher education studies in Malaysia [28]. In addition, these findings support what Pho and Schartner [33] have observed that foreign students' English communication skills in EMI can be enhanced by having prior knowledge about the host institution's education system as well as its teaching and learning approaches. These results also align with other research work, for example, Refs. [34–37].

Specifically, the findings highlight the significance of undergoing oral academic English training. It is recommended that host university administrators try to provide training courses, such as *Academic English Communication Skills with Supervisors*, *English Communication Skills with Colleagues from Other Countries*, and *English Verbal Skills in Classrooms*. In addition to what Kim [35] mentioned, it is important for institutions to provide academic English training courses for international students studying in EMI campuses. These courses could be provided as elective courses by Malaysian higher education institutions for

international EFL students [11]. This finding is also consistent with that of Ryan [38], who suggested that “universities must respond to the needs of international students by opening their doors to them, and then making sure they have access to their curriculum once they’ve been admitted.”

Interestingly, another strategy that the participants suggested in overcoming the challenges in English academic communication in Malaysian universities is *Taking Measures in Avoiding Prejudice*. The participants reported experiencing prejudice from their lecturers in Malaysian higher institutions, which might be caused by earlier international Chinese students' negative attitudes towards studies and nondiligent behavior in class. As a majority of this cohort of Chinese students failed in the National Entrance Examination to Colleges (Gao Kao) in China, these young teenagers come to a foreign country to continue their college studies, but they lack motivation and have no clear blueprint in their mind, influenced negatively by the failure of the National Exam (Gao Kao) [39]. These students might not work hard as they are influenced by homesickness or are struggling in an unfamiliar environment [40].

However, increasing numbers of international Chinese students are coming to Malaysian higher institutions to pursue higher degrees because of the Silk Road initiative and the increasingly better diplomatic relationship between Malaysia and China [41, 42]. This emerging group of international Chinese students in Malaysia is better prepared as a requirement of the Silk Road policy, and a majority of them have a clear blueprint for their future [42]. Therefore, a majority of them work hard and are positive about pursuing academic studies in Malaysian higher institutions. To overcome these issues, the participants hope that lecturers of host universities could have the capacity to embrace this cohort of young teenage students and try to help them grow rather than show prejudice.

In addition, there are issues where the prejudice is not because of the students' faults, but they are the lecturers' prejudice [43]. The participants suggested that host university administrators take adequate measures, such as *Lecturer Training and Monitoring Mechanisms*, and provide proper channels for students to file complaints about such irresponsible lecturers who are prejudiced. To establish real world-class universities in Malaysia and improve collaboration with China, Malaysian universities are expected to take adequate measures to avoid prejudices in the learning context.

Another strategy that the participants suggested to overcome the challenges in English academic communication in Malaysian universities is that host universities providing English communication activities. According to communicative competence theory, nonnative speakers should master the ability to apply the English language in a specific context through numerous oral English communication activities [30]. Apart from academic workshops and seminars, which many host universities in Malaysia are conducting, host universities can help further alleviate the issues faced by all international students by constantly holding informal and social English communication activities in which they can participate [11]. This could also help



to enhance cultural exchanges between international students and local Malaysian students. It could help broaden both parties' horizons and improve English communication competence for all nonnative-English speakers. This finding resonates with the previous findings by Zhai and Razali [5] that international EFL students need various English language activities to improve their English communication skills and increase their confidence to express themselves in English.

Most importantly, the participants suggested that they *equip themselves by using self-motivation and self-learning methods* to overcome the challenges in English communication in Malaysian universities. Self-efficacy theory posits that students equipped with high self-efficacy have high motivation to work hard to improve their English communication competence to achieve their academic goals [29]. Therefore, self-motivated learning is an essential and effective measure to enhance international postgraduate Chinese students' English oral communication competence in overseas studies in Malaysian higher education institutions [5]. In the modern mass-media digital world, there are many free online learning materials and oral English communication learning applications using AR to help improve English learners' communication competence [44]. These findings are in line with the studies by Phan Le Ha [20] and Zhai and Razali [5], who suggested that international EFL students utilize digital aids to improve their oral English communication competence. Thus, these findings revealed that international Chinese postgraduate students should be self-motivated and diligent in improving their English oral communication competence for academic purposes.

## 6. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There are some limitations to this present study. First, this study investigated students' perspectives, not lecturers' perspectives. Therefore, future research could extend the views to lecturers. Second, this study used only semi-structured interviews for data collection. It is hoped that future research could use more comprehensive questionnaires to ensure that the findings are generalized. However, the results of this study are beneficial to those Malaysian higher education institutions seeking measures to improve international service quality.

## 7. Conclusions

Oral English academic communication competence is the most significant competence for nonnative-English-speaking students in their overseas studies on an English-medium campus in an unfamiliar country [5, 45]. Based on the literature, English communication competence for academic success highlights the necessity of research among Chinese mainland postgraduate students in their overseas studies in English-medium higher education institutions. Host universities, policymakers, and, more importantly, the global Chinese mainland students themselves need to solve these

academic English communication challenges using effective strategies to enhance their communicative competence.

As a consequence, this study has several implications for future international mainland Chinese postgraduate students to overcome the academic oral English communication challenges encountered in Malaysian higher education institutions since there are few published articles on this topic in comparison to the previously published articles focusing on the western context, for example, [46, 47]. Based on the current research findings, the most complex challenge international Chinese students face in their overseas studies in Malaysian higher education institutions is their poor English communication competence. However, most global Chinese postgraduate students have good marks in the IELTS examination. Still, few can speak English fluently and confidently in natural academic settings. Insufficient oral English communication competence impedes most international Chinese students' progress in academic achievement [6]. In other words, professional English communication competence can help establish these students' confidence in their academic pursuits in Malaysian higher institutions and their daily lives in Malaysia [3]. This is where it is essential to practice strategies to solve oral academic English communication competence. We believe that the findings of this study are an excellent start to making in-depth explorations of discovering the approach to solve this issue.

Therefore, this study has also presented some plans for future international Chinese mainland students and policymakers and host university administrators and program planners to overcome issues with these students' challenges in scholarly communication. Thus, political and academic efforts are needed to develop an international language policy that supports the development of a global language education program at an international level and a foreign language education policy that assists in strengthening the quality of international education service in Malaysian higher education institutions [5, 6].

## Data Availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its Supplementary Material. Raw data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## Supplementary Materials

Three experts in the TESOL field validated our interview questions and protocols to collect data. A semistructured interview was conducted to answer the research questions (e.g., strategies for English communication). Each session lasted for 50 minutes and was conducted in the participants' native language, Mandarin Chinese. Three in-depth

interviews were conducted via Zoom with six international Chinese postgraduates. Students checked the transcripts and then had three experts fluent in Mandarin Chinese and English translate them into English. All participants gave written consent and permission to record the interviews. (*Supplementary Materials*)

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