


ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

 Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026. Page#.1624-1630

 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18806747) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18806747)

 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18806747)
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18806747>


Beyond the Language Barrier: A Qualitative Study of Pragmatic Problems Faced by Pakistani Students in China

Waliullah Dahri

Lecturer (English) Sindh Agriculture University Tandojam

waliullahdahri@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2479-2326>

Hafeez ul Rehman

Lecturer (English) Education Department Government of Sindh

hafeez9696rehman@gmail.com

Kashif Shaikh

Lecturer (English) IBA Community College Jacobabad

kashif.shaikhiba@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The increasing number of Pakistani students pursuing higher education in China, fueled by initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and available scholarships, highlights the strengthening educational ties between the two nations. However, these students often encounter significant pragmatic challenges that impact their academic and social integration. This study investigates the pragmatic problems specifically communication barriers, social integration challenges, and cultural differences faced by Pakistani students in China. Employing a qualitative research design, data was collected through semi-structured online interviews with five male Pakistani students at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students struggle with Mandarin proficiency and non-verbal cues, face initial difficulties in social integration due to cultural and language barriers, and navigate complex differences in academic expectations and social etiquette. The study concludes that addressing these multifaceted challenges is crucial for enhancing the academic experience of Pakistani students and further solidifying Sino-Pak educational cooperation. It recommends targeted support mechanisms to facilitate smoother cultural and academic adaptation.

Keywords: *Cross-Cultural Communication, Pakistani Students, Pragmatic Challenges, Social Integration, China-Pakistan Educational Exchange, Qualitative Study*

I. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

In the recent past, China has emerged as one of the most preferred study destinations across the globe including the Pakistan students too. This has been fostered by the growth and expansion of educational facilities in China, competitive scholarships as well as the China-Pakistan cooperation on frameworks such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) among others (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Increased enrolment of Pakistani students in Chinese universities demonstrates the expansion of education, and culture relationship between the two countries, whereas thousands of students from Pakistan is currently studying in China different fields (Ministry of Education, 2020).

However, with time, a common thing has emerged; more Pakistanis are enrolling themselves in China, despite several pragmatic issues that have an impact on the students' performance and experience in

China. Such questions as language, culture, and social integration are also some of the challenges faced. To overcome these challenges, it is important to have better understanding about the problems faced by Pakistani students in China so as to make changes to melt them into the Chinese society and give them more academic friendly atmosphere to ensure their apposite academic performance (Zhang, 2012). Analyzing the data provided by the Ministry of Education in China, it can be highlighted that the number of Pakistani students in China has increased considerably during the past 10 years (Ministry of Education, 2020). Various reasons have however contributed to this increase these include, availability of scholarships, low cost of education and high-quality institutions in China. BRI & CPEC have also helped a lot in exchange of students between two countries Ali (2019). Not only have these measures helped students to move but they have also contributed to the enhancement of the educational and cultural mobility of human beings.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the increasing number of Pakistani students in China, driven by initiatives like CPEC and scholarships (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021; Ali, 2019), existing research on international students often adopts a broad perspective, focusing generally on language barriers and cultural adaptation (Zhang & Mi, 2010; Heng, 2018). However, a critical gap remains in the specific investigation of the intertwined pragmatic challenges spanning communication, social integration, and cultural norms uniquely faced by the Pakistani student cohort (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). This lack of a focused understanding means that the distinct difficulties of this growing demographic are often overlooked, hindering the development of targeted support systems that could enhance their academic and social integration.

1.3. Research Objectives

To investigate the pragmatic challenges faced by Pakistani students in China focusing on communication barriers, social integration challenges, and cultural differences.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several stakeholders. The research can be used to enhance the services and social transition programs for international students that can help the educational institutions in China (Wang, 2015). Regarding students of Pakistan, the findings may inform the government and other educational organizations in offering adequate training and assistance for intending international students (Ali, 2019). For the future and the current Pakistani students, the data gives a insight information of what they are to gear themselves for and how they can deal with some of the issues faced when studying in China (Chen, 2016). Finally, this research is expected to pave towards the improvement of the educational status of the Pakistani students in China to bring about the needed improved relations between the two countries concerning education.

II. Literature Review

2.1. Definition and Scope of Pragmatics in Language Learning

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics which deals with the function and the role which the context plays in interpretation of the meaning. Pragmatics shares several components, as general elements such as proverbs, speech acts, conversational implicature, deixis, and politeness strategies (Yule, 1996). It deals with the use of language and how the speakers and listeners engage in making conversation and getting a message across. (Kasper and Rose, 2001). In the context of language learning, pragmatics is important since it equips the learners with the ability of how to use language in a right manner within different social and cultural circumstances, reducing misunderstandings and cases of miscommunication (Kasper and Rose, 2001).

2.2. Cross-Cultural Communication Theories

Cross-cultural communication theories are theories that try to explain how the people from different cultures relate and communicate. One foundational theory is Hofstede's cultural dimension theory that explains the critical ways in which culture difference, for instance, individualism/high power distance and collectivism /low power distance (Dutta, U., & Martin, J. N.,2017). Another theory that can be applied here is high low context communication theory by Hall where he tries to depict high context as a culture where, every communication has a hidden meaning while low, on the other hand, is a culture where every message as it is understood without interior meaning (Dutta, U., & Martin, J. N.,2017). These theories make it possible to understand difficulties that can be faced by international students concerning unfamiliarity of the cultural context and different norms of communication.

2.3. Previous Studies on International Students in China

Analyzing the previous research on international students in China, researchers have found a few issues regarding pragmatic competence. The study conducted by Zhang and Mi (2010) has indicated that one of the major challenges international students encounters is language barriers that affect their academic performance, as well as interaction with the locals. Besides, other issues such as cultural relevance has also been deemed crucial, because most learners find it hard to cope between the new society's culture and those of the host country and the faculty's expectations (Heng, 2018). For instance, Tian and Lowe, (2014) observed that culture and language differences would greatly affect students and limit their ability to actively participate and engage in classroom activities as the students are unknown to the Chinese educational system and classroom dynamics.

2.4. Specific Challenges Faced by South Asian Students Abroad

There are several issues which South Asian students, including Pakistani students experience while studying abroad. These difficulties are due cultural differences relating to language and stereotypes. A survey by Brown & Jones, 2013 reveals that such policies may not work effective for students hailing from South Asia due to the different educational culture where more importance is given to hierarchy and rote learning than individual responsibility and intensive learning. Moreover, prejudice and stereotyping can also be a concern for South Asian students, which can undermine their efforts to assimilate into social groups and may have adverse effects on their psychological well-being (Sherry et al., 2010). Conducted particularly in China, research has revealed that South Asian students could have challenges in sharing time with their peers, which are locals owing to differences in culture and language (as cited in Byram, 2008).

2.5. Gaps in Existing Research

Despite the increasing interest in researching international students in China, some areas have not been fully explored. While most of the previous studies discussed approaches to language barriers and cultural change broadly, there is a lack of research investigating pragmatic difficulties Pakistani students experience. Furthermore, to get a better understanding of the factors affecting these students, further research should be done to look at how linguistic, cultural, and social barriers affect their education. Such differences can be useful in designing support interventions to best fit the patient population under consideration. In addition, most of the published research focuses more on the problems instead of the strengths and the ways that all those students can overcome the barriers they face, which may help not only the students but also the teachers and other staff to learn and adapt better (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

III. Methodology

A. Research Method

A qualitative approach was used for this research paper.

B. Participants

Since access to all Pakistani students was a time-taking job; therefore, convenient sampling technique was used, and four male and one female participants from various departments of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, were participating in this study.

C. Data Collection Method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to get detailed information. The questions of the interviews were made by focusing on the objectives of the study.

All interviews were conducted online through Zoom, and the voice was recorded with the permission of the participants. The duration of interviews was within 15-25 minutes, depending upon the participants.

D. Data Analysis

All the recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Afterwards, the data were analyzed by using a thematic analysis approach of Miles et al. (2013). Following multiple iterations of coding to improve the data, it was classified into appropriate categories, which ultimately resulted in the identification of core themes.

E. Ethical Considerations

The researchers have followed all the participants' ethical obligations, including keeping their dignity, confidentiality, and avoiding negative impacts. After obtaining the respondents' informed consent, every interview was carried out.

IV. Findings

4.1. Communication Barriers

Pakistani students studying in China face various challenges related to language and cultural differences. In academic settings, while some have prepared by learning basic Mandarin before coming to China, others initially struggle with understanding vocabulary and participating confidently in discussions. Language barriers affect social interactions differently, some students interact comfortably without facing significant language barriers, while others find it challenging, especially with Chinese teachers. Misunderstandings due to cultural differences are also common, from difficulties in interpreting non-verbal cues to navigating different norms of politeness and humor.

Someone said that *"Before coming to China, I have learnt some basic Mandarin Chinese and this helps me to understand the language but non verbal cues creates some misunderstanding with the native Chinese"*

4.2. Social Integration Challenges

At some point, Pakistani students in China have different ideas on how to make friends with other Chinese individuals. This is because they initially have many challenges through cultural and language barriers but as they learn more about the culture and their language barriers, friendship is not very difficult to come across and is very rewarding. Chinese peers are polite and would therefore be helpful and patient with the students to assist them to fully engage in the Chinese culture. When questioned about experiences or observations of discrimination based on nationality or ethnicity, a few students admit they have felt it occasionally while others report that they never have. Most of these requirements promote on speaking the language and understanding the culture, participating in activities outside the class, friends, and others.

One of participants states *“Initially, It was very difficult to contact with Chinese peers but gradually they (Chinese peers) helped us to improve our language and cultural understanding, they are good at friendship.”*

4.3. Cultural Differences

The interaction of Pakistani students, who study in China, opens many possibilities, but it also reveals the differences in cultural expectations, attitudes toward learning, and conduct in class. They embraced wearing traditional attires as part of the cultural experience. Following these elaborate and regulated norms such as gift giving and dining etiquette can be rather challenging. In terms of academic values, they clearly acknowledge the importance of research work. However, the major concern regarding the emphasis on memorization and testing. Classroom dynamics present mixed experiences, whereas some of the students find teaching methods very easy, others find difficult. Even changing to more lectures and less of teacher-student participation as well as the traditional classroom settings makes challenges. Another participant states *“When we went to events with Chinese peers, we found that their custom is to wear the traditional dress, it was very challenging to wore traditional dress because it led to embarrassment when wore it improperly”*

V. Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that Pakistani students in China face significant communication barriers, which aligns with prior research on international students (Zhang & Mi, 2010). While some preparation in Mandarin is beneficial, the challenges extend beyond vocabulary to the pragmatic aspects of language use, such as interpreting non-verbal cues and navigating politeness strategies (Kasper & Rose, 2001). This indicates that effective communication requires not only linguistic competence but also a deep, context-dependent understanding of Chinese high-context communication styles (Hall, 1976), for which students are often unprepared.

Regarding social integration, the initial isolation experienced by participants echoes the vulnerabilities of international student populations noted by Sherry et al. (2010). However, the role of Chinese peers as patient facilitators of integration emerges as a critical positive factor. This finding supports the concept that social networks are vital for creating an "international community of practice" (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009, p. 458). The mixed reports on discrimination suggest that integration is a highly individual experience, yet it is consistently mediated by proactive efforts in language acquisition and participation in extracurricular activities.

Finally, the cultural and academic adjustments highlight a clash of educational paradigms. The Pakistani students' struggle with a perceived emphasis on memorization over critical analysis reflects the cultural dimensions of education, where differences in power distance and collectivism become apparent (Hofstede, 1980). Adapting to formal etiquette and passive classroom dynamics represents a significant pragmatic challenge, underscoring the need for structured cultural orientation programs that move beyond superficial advice to address deep-seated academic values and social norms, thereby facilitating a more holistic adaptation (Chen, 2016).

VI. Conclusion

Therefore, this study highlights the practical issues affecting the Pakistani students studying in China and deems it crucial to recognize such barriers and improve the experiences of the students. It was found that there are considerable communication problems, problems with integration into a society, and cultural problems that have a strong effect on their abilities and quality of life. To address these issues, it is necessary to use the measures that focus on the characteristics of Pakistani students, thus creating the better conditions for Pakistani learners in Chinese Universities. Addressing these concerns enhances

effective students' performance, tightened Sino-Pak relationship as well as improving the attributes of both countries' education systems (Ali, 2019).

References

- Ali, S. (2019). Educational exchanges under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. *Journal of International Education Research*, 15(2), 123-137.
- Brown, L., & Jones, I. (2013). The development of the guide for the perception of international students. *Journal of International Students*, 3(1), 27-40.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Campbell, J., & Li, M. (2008). Asian students' voices: An empirical study of Asian students' learning experiences at a New Zealand university. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(4), 375-396.
- Chen, Y. (2016). Cultural adaptation of Pakistani students in China. *Global Education Studies*, 5(2), 56-70.
- Dutta, U., & Martin, J. N. (2017). Theoretical perspectives on communication and cultures. *Handbooks of Communication Science*, 9, 45-65.
- Gu, Q. (2011). Language and cultural challenges in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 51(1), 144-152.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books.
- Heng, T. T. (2018). Exploring the complex and non-linear evolution of Chinese international students' experiences in US higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37 (5), 1141-1155.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Sage.
- Kasper, G., & Rose, K. R. (2001). Pragmatics in language teaching. In K. R. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 1-9). Cambridge University Press.
- Ministry of Education. (2020). Statistics on international students in China. Beijing: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2021). China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) overview. Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.
- Montgomery, C., & McDowell, L. (2009). Social networks and the international student experience: An international community of practice? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(4), 455-466.
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. H. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education*, 60(1), 33-46.
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. H. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education*, 60(1), 33-46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z>
- Tian, M., & Lowe, J. (2014). Intercultural education and international students' adaptation to life and study in a UK university. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 7 (1), 15-28.
- Wang, L. (2015). International students' experiences in Chinese universities: An overview. *Journal of International Students*, 5 (4), 452-469.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Zhang, Z. (2012). The role of cultural exchange programs in international education. *International Education Journal*, 11(3), 219-232.

Zhang, Z., & Mi, Y. (2010). Another look at the language difficulties of international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(4), 371-388.