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## **Supporting Practices to Break Chinese International Students' Language Barriers: The First Step to Facilitate Their Social Adjustment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Due to the significant growth in Chinese students pursuing education abroad, there is an increasing trend for researchers to study Chinese international students' challenges, especially the challenges in social adjustment. However, only a few studies intend to design activities or supporting practices to solve these challenges. This study, drawing upon cultural-historical theory and community psychology, provided four activities to break Chinese international students' language barriers and facilitate their social adjustment. By conducting four trials, this study found that Chinese international students realize their English capabilities, become actively engaged in interactions, and experience positive emotions when positioned in practices that (a) provide structural guidance and active mobilization, (b) involve shared intersubjectivity and contradictions, and (c) offer support within their zone of proximal development.

**Keywords:** Chinese international students, language barrier, social adjustment, zone of proximal development

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Within the context of the rapid globalization movements and under the support from the Chinese government, there has been a significant increase in Chinese students pursuing education abroad, especially in English countries (Waters & Brooks, 2011). China has become the top country of origin for international students in 2014–2016 in the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2016), United Kingdom (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2017), Canada (Canadian Bureau for International

Education, 2016), and Australia (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016). Due to the large population, researchers are studying Chinese international students' experiences and challenges (Cao & Zhang, 2012; Valdez, 2015b). Many of these studies report that Chinese international students tend to isolate themselves from the host society (Sherry et al., 2010; Yan & Berliner, 2011), and face difficulties in social adjustment, which is a process of fitting into a host society, establishing new social relations, and developing a sense of belonging (Gong & Fan, 2006; Kažnici, 2012). Although their challenges are widely recognized, only a few studies make efforts to develop supporting practices to facilitate their social adjustment. This study intends to fill this gap.

To achieve this aim, one must understand challenges for Chinese international students to socially adjust to the host culture/country. Recent studies have shown that language and culture are the two main barriers (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Tovaes & Kamwangamalu, 2017). Specifically, the language barrier comprises: (a) a barrier in understanding people's speaking and being understood, (b) a barrier in understanding the slangs and jokes, and (c) a lack of confidence to use English (Jackson, 2016). The cultural barrier involves: (a) unfamiliarity with the host culture, (2) difficulties in adapting to the new culture, and (c) the inability to balance the contradictions between opposing cultural values and customs (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). Language and culture are inseparable. On one hand, culture is materialized and delivered by language, and thus language serves as the symbolic tool to express and understand a certain culture (Tovaes & Kamwangamalu, 2017). On the other hand, language is embedded in culture, and thus the meanings of certain words only make sense by placing them in a certain cultural context (Tovaes & Kamwangamalu, 2017).

Although Chinese international students move to a new country, many of them still stay with their Chinese counterparts and have less communication with people of other countries (Zheng, 2010), and thus they have little opportunity to socially adjust to the new country. In this sense, they fall into a vicious circle: The more they stay with their Chinese counterparts and speak mandarin, the less confidence and willingness they have to connect with the new culture and to speak English. In turn, the less they connect with the new culture and speak English, the more they will find a sense of belonging by staying with their Chinese counterparts. Following this logic, the study assumes that the first step to facilitate Chinese international students' social adjustment is to help them break the language barrier. This study investigates four activities as supporting practices to break this barrier.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this study (see Figure 1), the cultural-historical concept of "general genetic law of cultural development" is used to define the social adjustment process. The concept of "community intervention" from community psychology and the cultural-historical idea of "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) are applied to design the supporting practices to break Chinese international students' language barriers and facilitate their social adjustment.

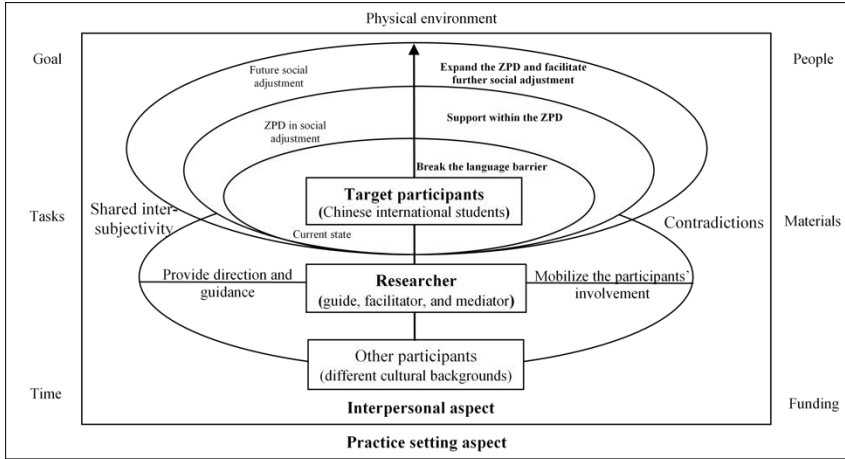


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

### General Genetic Law of Cultural Development

The development process of higher mental functions is the subject of cultural-historical theory (Veresov, 2010). It comprises two branches: (a) mastering external materials of cultural development and thinking, and (b) developing special higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1997). In relation to the current study, Chinese international students' social adjustment falls into the first branch. Meanwhile, development of higher mental function conforms to the general genetic law of cultural development: "Cultural development ... appears on the stage twice, in two forms—at first as social, then as psychological; at first as ... an intermental category, then as ... an intramental category" (Vygotsky, 1998a).

Here, the "category" should not be replaced by the word "level" as the 1978 volume *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978) did, because cultural development is not a simple process of internalization—from intermental level to intramental level. Instead, the "category" refers to the dramatic collision (contradiction or conflict) or the emotion-colored interaction (Veresov, 2004; Vygotsky, 1999). In this sense, the intermental category is the dramatic collision that takes place socially among people, while the intramental category is the dramatic collision that happens intrinsically within the individual (Veresov, 2016). In relation to the current study, social adjustment, as a process of cultural development, conforms to this general genetic law. It appears first as a form of social interaction between people on a social plane that may involve the gaps between different people's language capabilities, and the contradictions between different people's thinking, behaviors, and customs, etc. Then it appears as an individual means of dealing with the inner collision caused by the social gaps and contradictions on an individual plane. These dramatic collisions on social and individual planes may serve as the moving force for the individual to balance between different social cultural thinking, customs, and behaviors, and to

solve the conflict between the previous and new patterns of communication and thinking, which may lead to the individual's social adjustment.

The general genetic law suggests that to facilitate Chinese international students' social adjustment, they should be positioned in a social interaction involving plenty of contradictions, which could cause their inner collisions and elicit the development of a means to deal with these inner collisions. Therefore, in designing the supporting practices, we need to ensure: (a) the variation in people's English capabilities, (b) the cultural diversity, and (c) the difference between people's values and beliefs.

### **Community Intervention and the ZPD**

Community psychology studies mainly concentrate on (a) the contemporary issues (e.g., health, political, and racial, etc.) within the communities and the wider society (Dageid et al., 2016); (b) the approaches to deal with the contemporary issues (May et al., 2017); and (c) the relationships between the individuals or the special groups to the communities and the wider society (Lenzi et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2017). Although cultural diversity issues have been widely researched, and immigrant Chinese as ethnic minority groups in Western countries have gained increasing attention in community psychology (Huang et al., 2016), there have been few studies on community intervention or the ZPD of Chinese students in English-speaking countries. This study fills this gap in the community psychology and searches for a suitable approach to support Chinese international students' social adjustment by drawing upon the model of community intervention introduced by O'Donnell et al. (1993).

According to O'Donnell et al. (1993), the goal of community intervention is to influence social interaction among people, to sustain their relationships, and to generate shared intersubjectivity. Both the goal of community intervention and the concept of general genetic law of cultural development suggest that supporting practices should search for ways to promote social interaction between Chinese international students and their peers. Community intervention places great emphasis on shared intersubjectivity, while the general genetic law of cultural development focuses on contradictions or conflicts. The current study does not view these two points as opposing, but assumes that creating intersubjectivity among people and eliciting the contradictions or conflicts between people are both necessary. However, how to balance the intersubjectivity and the contradictions or conflicts, or when and how to create intersubjectivity or to elicit contradictions or conflicts will be further sought out in this study. O'Donnell et al. (1993) further argued that the process of the community intervention needs to begin with the identification of the people's problems and the assessment of the current patterns of assistance (e.g., who may need it or who may not). This suggests that the supporting practices should be designed based on the Chinese international students' actual needs.

Such needs will be assessed by using the cultural-historical idea of ZPD, which is defined as the "distance between the actual developmental level determined by individual problem solving and the level of development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable" (Vygotsky, 1978) or the "area of immaturity, but maturing processes" (Vygotsky, 1998b). In this

sense, consistent with community intervention, it also requires the researcher to understand the actual level of the Chinese international student's English capability before providing supporting practices. The supporting practices should aim to build the interpsychological relationship between the Chinese international student and the people of other cultures within the Chinese international student's ZPD (Clarà, 2017). However, the individual's ZPD cannot be assessed before placing the individual within the supporting practices. In other words, what supporting practices are within or beyond the individual's ZPD will only become visible when they are participating in the practices. Therefore, in this study, different types of supporting practices are provided to find which might be within the Chinese international student participants' ZPD.

## **METHODS**

A case study based on two focus participants was conducted to investigate the key characteristics of activities as supporting practices that are effective in breaking the language barriers of Chinese international students. The study analyzes interactions between the Chinese international student participants and other participants during different activities. The study was conducted in a university setting in Australia. The study has two phases (see Data Collection).

### **Research Participants**

I recruited 18 research participants in total, including two Chinese international students and 16 other participants (eight from English-speaking countries and eight from non-English speaking countries). I recruited the two focus participants (i.e., Jing and Hao [pseudonyms]) from a casual social activity that I organized. The activity invited university students from different countries to gather together. I posted an advertisement in Facebook and WeChat (a popular social mobile app among Chinese international students). Over 100 students expressed interest. Due to the limited space of the activity room, I only selected 40 people (including five Chinese international students). Of the Chinese international students recruited, I selected five who had stayed in Australia less than 2 years. Prior to the activity, I encouraged the Chinese international students not to stay with other Chinese international students during the activities, so that their social adjustment level could be indicated from how they interacted with students from other countries. I selected Jing (female) and Hao (male) as the focus participants as I observed them to be most passive among the five Chinese international students, which indicated that they might be experiencing more social adjustment difficulties. Table 1 presents the two focus participants' basic information. I recruited the remaining 16 participants from the same university; the two focus participants attended by an announcement in Facebook or by direct contact through email.

**Table 1: Basic Information of the Focus Participants**

Name	Gender	Age	Length of stay in Australia	IELTS Score	Course of study
Jing	F	24	1.5 yr	6.5	Master of Business
Hao	M	23	1 yr	7	Master of Accounting

*Note.* IELTS = International English Language Testing System.

### **Data Collection**

The main data were from observations (5 hr total) and interviews (2 hr for each focus participant). I documented the social activity by taking notes, video-recording the activities, and audio-recording the interviews. This section explains how the data were collected from the two phases.

#### ***Phase One: Casual Social Activity and Interview Prior to the Four Activities***

The casual activity lasted 1 hr. Refreshments were provided and all the participants were invited to gather in a room which seemed as a casual social gathering. The researcher encouraged Chinese international students to have more contact with students from other countries to practice English speaking instead of staying with other Chinese international students. I primarily observed how the five Chinese international students interacted with other participants. Both of the focus participants consented to participate in the research project. They were then invited to the interviews, which were conducted in Mandarin and focused on their experience of social adjustment, views on English speaking, and expectations for the study's activities. Although some interview questions were preplanned, new questions came up according to the participants' response. Based on observations during the social activity and the interviews, I gathered information on the two focus participants' general experience of social adjustment, language capability, and the reasons for their language barriers.

#### ***Phase Two: Supporting Practices***

I conducted four activities within 4 weeks: two painting activities, a quiz competition, and role play. Both the first painting activity and the quiz competition were open practices with little guidance. In the first painting activity, no specific goal was set beforehand, but in the quiz competition, winning was the goal for each group. Both the second painting activity and the role play were guided practices, but the role play involved more participant interaction than the painting activity.

Two clarifications should be stated. First, this study does not intend to find which specific activity was a superior supporting practice, and then advocate for only conducting a particular activity. Instead, these four supporting activities were

designed, conducted, and compared to investigate what characteristics of each activity were important in breaking the language barrier of Chinese international students and facilitating their social adjustment. Second, six aspects were investigated to identify what characteristics of the activities were important: (a) with guidance or without guidance, (b) the method of guidance, (c) with goal or without goal, (d) the nature of the goal, (e) with or without interaction, and (e) the nature of interaction. This study admits that other aspects, such as the physical environment, the type of materials and resources, and the composition of the participants, should also be taken into consideration. However, due to the limited research time, only the six above-mentioned aspects were focused.

**Table 2: Four Activities for Chinese International Students**

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Activity	General process	
Open practice	Painting Activity 1 (1 hr, Week 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants freely decided what to draw.</li><li>• No specific goal, theme, or requirement.</li><li>• No guidance.</li></ul>
	Quiz competition (0.5 hr, Week 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants were divided into two groups.</li><li>• Participants in each group were not assigned certain roles.</li><li>• Researcher read the questions and the participants raced to be the first to answer.</li></ul>
Guided practice	Painting Activity 2 (1 hr, Week 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Researcher guided the process.</li><li>• Participants were asked to draw a picture together themed “the world” and to discuss what to draw.</li><li>• Researcher facilitated the focus participants’ involvement and communications.</li></ul>
	Role play (1.5 hr, Week 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants were asked to play the drama of “Snow White” and provided with the play script (participants could improvise).</li><li>• Participants were required to discuss each person’s role/</li><li>• Researcher intentionally encouraged the focus participants to integrate into the discussion.</li></ul>

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Each activity involved six university students (aged 22 to 28). Except for the two focus participants, the other participants in each supporting practice varied. In each activity, the researcher recruited two students from English-speaking countries and two students from two non-English speaking countries except China (see Table 3).

The reason for recruiting the international students from other countries is to mimic a typical multicultural university context in English-speaking countries. To differentiate participants in the analysis, each of them was named as a code.

**Table 3: All Participants in the Activities**

Activity	Participants (name code)
Painting Activity 1 (Week 1)	2 from English speaking countries (E1, E2); 1 from India (I1); 1 from Sri Lanka (SL)
Painting Activity 2 (Week 2)	2 from English speaking countries (E4, E5); 1 from Malaysia (M); 1 from Brazil (BZ)
Quiz competition (Week 3)	2 from English speaking countries (E6, E7); 1 from India (I2); 1 from Thailand (T)
Role play (Week 4)	2 from English speaking countries (E8, E9); 1 from Bangladesh (BD); 1 from Italy (IL)

After the activities, I interviewed each focus participant about their experience and their views and attitudes on English speaking. Based on the observations and the pre- and postactivity interviews, how the activities influenced their social adjustment can be assessed.

### **Data Analysis**

Due to the word limit, this paper only reports Jing's case, but it does not affect the research findings. The research data were analyzed in four layers. In the first layer, I transcribed data into words, and narrated chronologically with simple comments. In the second layer, I described the focus participant's (a) language expression, (b) actions/interactions and emotions, and (c) attitudes in each supporting practice. Language expression included everything the focus participant talked about in each activity. The actions/interactions refer to everything the focus participant did in each activity, including their facial expression, behaviors, and communications with other participants. I could not confirm the emotions I observed, but I noted what emotions seemed present in the participant's actions and interactions. The attitudes refer to the focus participant's thoughts, comments, and feelings about each activity. In the third layer, I analyzed how the focus participant's language expression, actions/interactions, and emotions and attitudes were different in different activities. In the final layer, I integrated all the previous layers of analysis, and holistically analyzed the information to identify the key characteristics of the activities that seemed most effective in breaking the language barrier of the Chinese international students and facilitating their social adjustment.



## RESULTS

The findings are divided into three aspects: the language expressions, the actions and emotions, and the attitudes toward language barriers and social adjustment.

### Language Expressions

Jing's expressions of language during different activities is comparatively analyzed from the perspective of "the frequency of talking" and "the types of communication" (see Table 4). The first perspective focuses on the number of sentences she spoke with other people within a certain amount of time. The second perspective analyzes whether the communication was unidirectional (one person asked and another responded, but the communication did not go further), bidirectional (sustained communication between two people), or multidirectional (sustained communication between three or more people; Ma, 2017). These two perspectives indicate Jing's different levels of willingness to communicate with others or the different opportunities she had to communicate in the different activities. The study assumes that although an individual's language capability cannot be greatly improved within a short period of time, the individual's willingness to talk and the opportunities to talk can be totally different when the individual is placed in different settings. Therefore, Jing's frequency of talking and the types of communication she engaged in during different activities are compared to identify the setting in which she was more willing to talk and had more opportunities to talk.

**Table 4: Jing's Frequency of Talking and Types of Communication in Different Settings**

Activity	Frequency of talking	Types of communication
Social activity	Number of sentences: 2 Time: 1 hr Frequency: 2 s/hr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All the sentences were from unidirectional communications. e.g., A person helped Jing pour the juice into her cup. Jing said "<i>thank you</i>" to the person and left.</li> </ul>
Painting Activity 1	Number of sentences: 8 Time: 1 hr Frequency: 8 s/hr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All the sentences were from unidirectional communications. e.g., E2 commented on the girl Jing was drawing: "so cute. I really like her hair style." Jing smiled to E2 and said "<i>thank you</i>," but did not have further communication.</li> </ul>
Painting activity 2	Number of sentences: 41 Time: 1 hr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>32 sentences were bidirectional or multidirectional communications; 9 sentences were from unidirectional communications</li> </ul>

Activity	Frequency of talking	Types of communication
	Frequency: 31 s/hr	e.g., Hao started to draw. Jing added: <i>“What about people. Ah...people with different cultures.”</i> Researcher: <i>“Good point.”</i> Jing was talking while drawing: <i>“And also I’d like to draw pandas.”</i> E3: <i>“I like panda. Don’t forget to draw some bamboos.”</i> BZ: <i>“Panda eats bamboos as their food.”</i> Jing: <i>“I watched a TV show, it said that panda is a kind of ... em, a kind of animal that eats meat.”</i> E4: <i>“Carnivores?”</i> Jing: <i>“What?”</i> Jing took out the mobile phone and opened the dictionary app. E4: <i>“Haha, are you going to search that word in the dictionary?”</i> Jing: <i>“Yes. I want to know that word.”</i> Jing searched and read the word out.
Quiz competition	Number of sentences: 3 Time: 0.5 hr Frequency: 6 s/hr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All the sentences were from unidirectional communications.</li> </ul> e.g., Jing, E6, and T were in the same group. The researcher asked a question. E6 asked Jing and T: <i>“Who knows?”</i> Jing shook head: <i>“I don’t know.”</i>
Role play	Number of sentences: 78 Time: 1.5 hr Frequency: 56 s/hr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 57 sentences were from bidirectional or multidirectional communications; 21 sentences were from unidirectional communications</li> </ul> e.g., BD: <i>“I will play a dwarf.”</i> Hao: <i>“But you are so tall, haha.”</i> People laughed. E8: <i>“We also need someone to play the huntsman.”</i> Jing: <i>“That’s right. We also need someone to play the hunter.”</i> IL: <i>“What about the king?”</i> Hao: <i>“We don’t have enough people. I think we need at least two dwarfs.”</i> E8: <i>“I agree.”</i> Jing: <i>“Then we just cut out that role (king)? The king does not talk too much, so I think cut out this role can be fine.”</i>

*Note.* Italics are used to emphasize Jing’s responses.

According to the Table 4, Jing’s frequency of talking varied from two sentences per hour in the social activity to 56 sentences per hour in the role play. While Jing’s communications in the social activity, first painting activity, and quiz competition were all unidirectional, she was involved in bidirectional and multidirectional communication in the second painting activity and during role play. The results

validate the assumption that under different conditions individuals can show totally different expressions of language, and the individual's language capability can be either greatly suppressed or fully exerted.

### **Actions/Interactions and Emotions**

Similarly, an individual can act differently and experience different emotions in different activities. This section shows Jing's different actions and interactions and the emotions that could be indicated from these actions and interactions.

**Table 5: Jing's Actions/Interactions and Emotions in Different Settings**

Activity	Actions/interactions	Emotions
Social activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jing was 5 minutes late. <i>She looked into the room and did not come in directly.</i> Researcher invited her to come in.</li> </ul>	Nervous
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the activity, Jing was <i>holding a plate and eating food alone.</i> When someone came close to her, she normally <i>stepped back.</i> When she had eye contact with other people, she normally <i>smiled and then looked away.</i> When the researcher said that the activity had finished, she <i>left alone,</i> while some participants were still chatting in the room.</li> </ul>	Avoided to have communications
Painting Activity 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jing was the first participant in the room. She <i>helped the researcher arrange the tables, and chatted with the researcher in Mandarin.</i></li> </ul>	Relaxed; engaged in communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When SL came, Jing <i>stopped chatting with the researcher and said "hello" to SL.</i> Jing <i>sat on the seat quietly.</i> E2 arrived and sat next to Jing. E2 greeted with Jing and briefly introduced herself. Jing <i>smiled to her and said "nice to meet you," but did not continue to chat with E2.</i></li> </ul>	Less relaxed; had no intentions to have deeper communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The researcher asked participants to discuss freely. Jing <i>carefully listened to other people with her arms crossed.</i> She <i>only responded the words like "yes" or "I agree".</i> After the</li> </ul>	

Activity	Actions/interactions	Emotions
	discussion, Jing <i>quietly painted on the paper</i> . When other participants commented on her painting, she <i>only responded "thank you"</i> .	
Painting Activity 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hao was the first participant in the room and Jing was the second. They initially <i>sat next to each other and chatted in Mandarin</i>. The researcher suggested them to sit separately. Jing <i>pouted and made a funny face to the researcher</i>. Jing and Hao continued chatting although they sat separate to each other. Jing was <i>making gestures and looking at Hao's eyes while chatting</i>.</li> </ul>	Relaxed and excited when chatting with Hao
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They <i>stopped chatting when M came</i>. M sat next to Jing. <i>Jing smiled to M and quickly looked away</i>. The researcher guided the discussion. Initially, Jing <i>only observed and listened with her hands on the chin</i>.</li> </ul>	Less relaxed; avoided to have deep communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The researcher asked Jing to present her ideas. Jing did not directly responded to the researcher's question, but commented on the earth E4 had drawn.</li> </ul>	More relaxed; more willing to present ideas; had deep communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When she was commenting, <i>she leaned forward</i>. Her comments received positive response. Then <i>she further presented her ideas</i>. The researcher gave positive comments on her ideas and <i>she presented more ideas and had deeper discussion with other participants</i>.</li> <li>After the discussion, Jing painted on the paper. The researcher walked around and looked at each participant's drawing and asked some questions. <i>Jing and other participants kept looking at each other's drawing. Jing also made some comments on other participants' drawing</i>.</li> </ul>	

Activity	Actions/interactions	Emotions
Quiz competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>T and E6 were the first two participants in the room, and Jing was the third. T and E6 were sitting next to each other and <i>Jing sat opposite to them. Jing played the mobile game before the practice started.</i> The researcher assigned each three people in one group. Jing, E6 and I2 were assigned in one group. <i>Jing smiled to her group partners, and did not have further communication.</i></li> </ul>	Avoided having deep communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The researcher read the questions and the participants raced to answer. <i>Jing merely observed and did not ask any question.</i> During the competition, <i>Jing sometimes looked at her mobile phone and sent messages.</i></li> </ul>	Not engaged in the competition; felt embarrassed
Role play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jing was the first participant in the room. <i>She chatted with the researcher in Mandarin.</i></li> </ul>	Relaxed; engaged in communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IL was the second participant who arrived in the room. When IL came in, Jing stopped chatting with the researcher, smiled to IL, and quickly looked away.</li> </ul>	Became less relaxed; avoided communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IL sat next to Jing. <i>IL asked Jing about her study and they chatted. Jing also showed the photos of the previous practices to IL.</i></li> </ul>	Became relaxed; engaged in communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The researcher asked them to discuss each person's role. <i>Jing was actively involved in the discussion. She not only responded to others' ideas but also presented her ideas.</i></li> <li>Jing played the queen. The participants normally discussed for a while and then continued the play. <i>Jing was involved in the discussion.</i></li> </ul>	

*Note.* Italics are used to emphasize actions that indicate potential emotions.

Jing's actions/interactions indicated that she was passive, nervous, and avoided communication or had no intentions to have deeper communication in the social activity, first painting activity, and quiz competition. However, Jing's emotions alternated between nervousness and relaxation, and between passiveness and activeness in the second painting activity and role play. Jing seemed relaxed when she interacted with the researcher and Hao, which proves that Jing's passiveness and nervousness when she was placed with the participants from other countries were not due to her personality. Jing became gradually relaxed and active after she was invited to communicate with the participants from other countries, indicating that her passiveness and nervousness could be alleviated if certain support was provided.

### **Attitudes Toward Language Barriers and Activities**

Jing's attitudes toward language barriers before and after the activities and her attitudes toward the four activities respectively are reflected in her responses to the researcher's questions in the interviews (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Jing's Attitudes Toward Language Barrier and Supporting Practices**

Attitudes		Jing's response
Language barriers	Before practice	"I usually avoid to communicate with people from other countries."
		"I avoid to ask them (people from other countries) because I always feel embarrassed if they do not understand my speaking or I don't understand their speaking."
		"Sometimes I feel good because I have so many Chinese friends, but sometimes I feel guilty because I learned little about the western culture."
	After practice	"Every time you (the researcher) urged me to present my ideas, I felt uncomfortable. But when I was involved in the discussion, I felt great. It seems that it is not that difficult to communicate with them."
		"Our (Chinese international students') English is hard to be improved as there are too many Chinese people here. If we are pushed to stay with people from other countries, our English will be quickly improved."
Supporting practice	Painting Activity 1	"I didn't know what I should do in this practice. I just followed others."
	Painting Activity 2	"I like it because you (the researcher) gave us a clear direction. I knew what I should do."

Attitudes	Jing's response
Quiz competition	"Although those questions were so-called simple questions, they were difficult for me."
Role play	"It's interesting. It made me relaxed because I had the play script so that I knew what I needed to speak."

Before the activities, Jing stated that she avoided communicating with people from other countries because she perceived herself incapable of freely communicating with them in English. Meanwhile, she experienced a paradox because while she gained a sense of security staying with other Chinese international students, she felt guilty because she was not improving in English and was failing to adjust to the mainstream society. In other words, Jing wanted to integrate to the mainstream society, but her perceived inadequate English hindered her from actively joining the communication or interactions with people from other countries and further prevented her from adjusting to the mainstream society. After the activities, Jing changed her opinions of the main reason for hindering her English improvement and social adjustment. She contended that Chinese international students had difficulties in improving English and adjusting to the mainstream society because they lacked the opportunities to speak English or there was no need to speak English in their daily lives due to the large population of Chinese people in Australia. She further assumed that if they were provided with more support and opportunities, they would quickly improve their English and adjust to the mainstream society. Jing's different opinions suggest that her experience in the activities helped her break the pattern of thinking that she was incapable of communicating well with people from other countries and made her believe that she had the potential to improve English and adjust to the mainstream society if she were provided with enough support and opportunities.

According to Jing's responses to the supporting practices, she had more positive experience in the second painting activity and role play because she was well guided and was clear about her tasks, roles, and responsibilities in the practices, but she had less positive experiences in the first painting activity and quiz competition because she got lost in these practices. This demonstrates that effective activities for negotiating language barriers and social adjustment need to provide participants with a clear guidance, tasks, roles and responsibilities.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the results shown above, this article argues that Chinese international students tend to (a) show different levels of English capabilities, (b) differently interact and communicate with others, and (c) experience different emotions when placed in different settings. To be more specific, in a certain activities (a) a Chinese international student's language capabilities could either be fully realized or greatly suppressed, (b) they could either be fully engaged or excluded in the interactions, and (c) they could experience either positive or negative emotions. Therefore, an effective supporting practice needs to fully realize Chinese international students' language

capabilities, include them in the interactions, and support them to experience more positive emotions. By comparing Jing's language expressions, actions/interactions, and emotions in the four different activities, this study found that Jing showed better English capabilities, was more willing to communicate and interact with others, and was more relaxed and active in the role play and second painting activity.

### **Structural Guidance and Active Mobilization**

The first possible reason for the outcomes of this study is that both the role play and the second painting activity were structurally guided and actively initiated by the researcher. First, the guidance helped the focus participants gain clear understanding of the tasks, goals, and requirements of the activity (consistent with Adams et al., 2008; Ma, 2017). As Jing commented on the different activities, she had a more positive experience in the role play and second painting activity because she was clear about what she needed to do, but she had a less positive experience in the first painting activity because she did not know what to do. Second, the researcher's mobilization pushed them to be active throughout the practices. As Table 6 shows, Jing only participated in the communication/interaction and became more active when the researcher invited her to be involved. For example, in the second painting activity, Jing passively listened and observed before the researcher asked Jing to present her ideas. However, she not only responded to the researcher, but also presented further comments and actively engaged in the discussions after the researcher asked her to present her ideas.

Providing guidance and mobilization to make an activity effective in breaking Chinese international students' language barriers is consistent with the concept of the ZPD. On the one hand, through guiding and mobilizing the practices, the focus participants' actual level of English capabilities, the social adjustment problems, as well as the reasons for the social adjustment problems could be identified. Only based on this information can we understand how the activities could be more effectively provided. On the other hand, it is only through guidance and mobilization that the focus participants' passiveness could be broken, and their social adjustment could be facilitated.

### **Shared Intersubjectivity and Contradictions**

The second possible reason for the outcome of this study is the shared intersubjectivity and the contradictions that were created in the role play and second painting activity. Take the second painting activity for instance; the shared intersubjectivity started to be built when the researcher asked the participants to draw a pictured themed "the world" together, and from this time all the participants were clear about the main task of this practice. The researcher intentionally invited all the participants (especially the focus participants) to this shared intersubjectivity by asking them to present their ideas. The shared intersubjectivity was further expanded and deepened when the participants were discussing or exchanging ideas about what to draw and how to draw it in the picture. During this process, contradictions also appeared. For example, Jing's description about the panda as a kind of carnivore



aroused a contradiction among participants as many of them did not believe that pandas eat meat. This contradiction led to a further discussion about pandas and in turn expanded the shared intersubjectivity. Compared to the second painting activity, the first painting activity lacked shared intersubjectivity and contradictions. The participants were not asked to achieve the same tasks in the practices, and thus the shared intersubjectivity could not be established. Since all the participants worked independently on their individual paintings, contradictions failed to appear due to the lack of deep interactions with each other. Within this setting, the focus participants talked less, acted passively, and showed more negative emotions.

The comparison of the two painting activities demonstrates that both the shared intersubjectivity and the contradictions are necessary in an effective practice to break Chinese international students' language barriers. The shared intersubjectivity supported them having a clear understanding of the practice tasks, connecting with each other to achieve the goals, and gaining a sense of belonging (consistent with Hogg, 2007; O'Donnell et al., 1993). The contradictions urged them to be actively involved and to interact with each other to solve the contradictions (consistent with Cheng et al., 2011; Veresov, 2004), and meanwhile helped to extend the shared intersubjectivity and deepen the interactions.

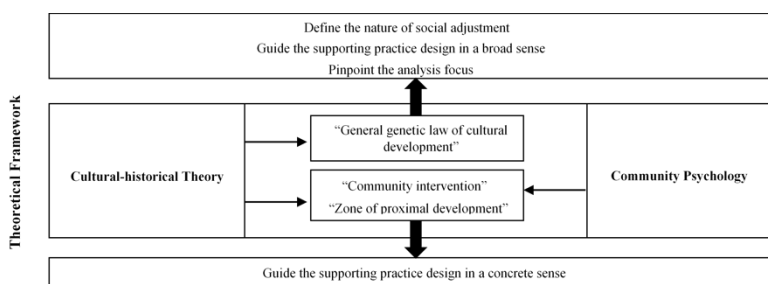
### **Support within the ZPD**

The third possible reason for the study outcomes is that the role play and second painting activity were within Jing's ZPD, and meanwhile both of the practices provided the focus participants with certain support within their ZPD. Take the second painting activity for example; Jing was unable to be actively involved in the discussion about "shape of the earth" and "panda" if the researcher did not "push" her to present her ideas. This "push," although presented as a simple request, worked as a support for Jing to be included in the discussion. It can be compared to Jing's performance in the first painting activity, where the researcher did not offer any request for Jing to present her ideas, and thus she merely listened to other participants' talking and was not involved in the discussion. The quiz competition shows another example of a practice that was non-achievable by Jing and that did not offer any support or guidance. The researcher quickly read the quiz questions without considering whether these questions were fully understood by the target participants. At the same time, no support was provided to help the target participants understand the questions or to get involved in the competition. Therefore, Jing had nearly no communication and interaction with other participants and felt bored during the quiz competition.

### **CONCLUSION**

This article generates two major findings. First, in different settings, Chinese international students may show different levels of English capabilities, express different willingness to participate in social interactions, and experience different emotions. Unlike many studies that argue that the lack of language proficiency is the main reason for their language barriers (Valdez, 2015a; Yan & Berliner, 2011), this

study suggests that it is low self-perceptions of English skills instead of the actual English capability that leads to their passiveness in social interactions and communication (consistent with Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Therefore, in addition to searching for ways to improve their English capabilities, it is more important to create a condition or offer opportunities for Chinese international students to realize their actual English capabilities and to improve their self-efficacy. Second, Chinese international students tend to realize their English capabilities, actively engage in the interactions, and experience positive emotions when being positioned in the activities that (a) provide structural guidance and active mobilization, (b) involve shared intersubjectivity and contradictions, and (c) offer support within their ZPD. Based on the two findings, this article creates a model (see Figure 2) to illustrate how an effective practice could be designed from the interpersonal aspect and practice setting to break the target participants' language barrier and to facilitate their social adjustment.



**Figure 2: A Model for Designing an Effective Supporting Practice**

From the practice setting aspect, the goal participants need to achieve and the tasks they need to complete in the activity should be defined. To intentionally pull the Chinese international students out of their Chinese community and push them into the broader society, it is also necessary to ensure cultural diversity (Ma, 2017). Admittedly, many contemporary studies have identified that staying with their Chinese counterparts instead of actively building social relations with people from other countries is one of the main reasons for Chinese international students' difficulties in acculturation and social adjustment (Sherry et al., 2010; Yan & Berliner, 2011). However, only a few studies make efforts to develop supporting practices to solve these problems. This article has filled this gap and takes the first step to support Chinese international students' social adjustment within a culturally diverse environment. The physical environment (e.g., space, room decoration, table, and chair arrangement, etc.), materials (e.g., painting tools provided for the painting activity), funding, and time, etc., should also be taken into consideration when designing an activity according to the specific theme, goal, and tasks of the activity.

From the interpersonal aspect, both shared intersubjectivity and contradictions are essential in maintaining high quality social interactions. Building a shared intersubjectivity and contradictions require the researcher to take multiple roles in the

supporting practice. First, they are the guide, providing participants with a clear direction and ensuring that all the participants fully understand the goal, the tasks, and the requirements of the practice. Second, they take the facilitator's role, intentionally mobilizing the participants, especially the target participants' active involvement in the practice. Third, they are the mediator between the target participants and the other participants, promoting their social interactions and communication. By taking these roles, the researcher also impels the target participants to break their language barriers and offers support within their ZPD in social adjustment, through which the target participants' ZPD could be expanded and their social adjustment could be facilitated.

This study has made a trial to design activities as supporting practices to break Chinese international students' language barriers as the first step to facilitate their social adjustment. Although the effectiveness of the supporting practices (characterized by guidance and mobilization, intersubjectivity and contradiction, as well as support within ZPD) need to be further tested, this study provides a direction for researchers and professionals to support Chinese international students' social adjustment. Although this study only investigates two Chinese international students in Australia, it assumes that the findings could be applied to Chinese international students in other English-speaking countries who face similar difficulties.

However, the study also has limitations. First, due to the limited research time and research funding, this study only recruited two focus participants from one cultural context, and thus although the data were relatively deep, the breadth of the data was unable to be ensured. In this sense, the need for wider investigation is indicated. Second, the researcher was positioned as an active participant in the supporting practices. Although it is essential to actively interact with the participants in order to better understand and interpret their languages, actions, emotions, and attitudes, etc., the researcher's bias could not be fully avoided. Finally, it is possible that the research participants temporarily changed their language expressions, actions, emotions, and attitudes in the activities, which cannot be simply equated with their social adjustment. However, this does not mean that the supporting practices are not relevant to facilitating Chinese international students' social adjustment. Instead, the changes of their language expressions, actions, emotions, and attitudes in the supporting practices indicate that Chinese international students have a great potential to be more socially adjusted when being provided a particular context as this study provided.

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