

# Affordances for cultural adjustment of international students learning Chinese as a second language in a mobile-assisted learning environment

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the study is to understand the mobile-assisted learning situation of international students in China from the perspective of cultural adjustment and explore the affordances for cultural adjustment of these students in this specific situation. This study investigated eight students learning Chinese as a second language in a university in Beijing and using mainly WeChat, a mobile technology. Qualitative methods were employed in this study. The researchers followed the students for three months (from September to November 2018) and collected all the online messages in the WeChat online group. Moreover, eight one-hour in-depth interviews with participants were conducted. Results showed that the characteristics of the international students' cultural adjustment in the mobile learning environment are universality, consciousness and unconsciousness, and interactivity. In addition, three affordances were identified: resources on Chinese linguistic and cultural knowledge, ways to obtain social support, and ways to relieve stress. Finally, two suggestions for international students are proposed.

**Keywords:** cultural adjustment, mobile learning environment, Chinese learning, international students.

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## 1. Introduction

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is an emerging research field undergoing rapid evolution (Duman, Orhon, & Gedik, 2015). In the past ten years, most researchers (e.g. Lu, 2008) have focused on how to use mobiles to improve the language levels and communication skills of second language learners. Few studies have been found investigating the process of learners' cultural adjustment. This study focused on the cultural adjustment of foreign students studying Chinese as a second language in a mobile-assisted learning environment.

Two theories guided this study: acculturation (Berry, 1989) and cultural shock (Oberg, 1960). Berry (1989) divides the cultural adaptation patterns of different groups into assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Cultural shock was proposed by Oberg (1960). He indicates that "cultural shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). It is hoped that this research could help international students for better cultural adjustment in a MALL environment, and also provide references for future research.

## 2. Methods

The study was conducted in an undergraduate second-year intercultural communication class at a university in Beijing. The main mobile technology used in this study was WeChat, "a widely used instant messaging app used on mobile phones or/and computers and released by Tencent in 2011" (Wu & Miller, 2019, p. 6).

In the class, the international students used WeChat to participate in the course discussions on different topics. After class, the international students and Chinese students conducted a one-month cooperative learning activity entitled 'Discussion of Cultural Differences' through WeChat.

### 2.1. Data collection

The researchers followed eight international students from September to November 2018 for a total of three months. With the consent of the participants, the researchers collected all the online messages in the WeChat group for a total of 30,000 words in Chinese. Moreover, the researchers conducted eight one-hour in-depth interviews (see Figure 1 below) with the participants.

Figure 1. Interview outline



## 2.2. Research questions

The research questions are as laid out below.

- (1) What are the characteristics of the international students' cultural adjustment in the mobile learning environment?
- (2) Are there any similarities or differences in the participants' adjustment experiences?
- (3) What are the affordances of MALL in cultural adjustment of international students?

## 2.3. Participants

In this study, eight participants were selected using a convenient sampling method. They were eight international students learning Chinese as a second language

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in a university in Beijing. Among the participants, there were four males and four females, all of whom were in the second year of undergraduate studies, and the average age was 22 years old. Moreover, they were from Greece, South Korea, Russia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela. Seven participants passed Level V of the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) and one participant passed Level VI.

## **2.4. Data analysis**

With a thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), two phases of data analysis were undertaken in this study. In the first phase, the researchers took a theoretically-informed and deductive approach to coding and looked for particular examples (e.g. the topic of communication and the role of participants in communication) and references (e.g. participants' feelings about using WeChat) to characteristics and affordances for cultural adjustment in the data. Then, the researchers categorized and coded them with distinct themes. In addition, timely discussions with the interviewees and each research group on summarized topics were carried out on October 20th, 2018.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### **3.1. Characteristics of the international students' cultural adjustment in the mobile-assisted learning environment**

The researchers summarized three characteristics of cultural adjustment. The first characteristic was universality. Data showed that seven out of eight participants said they used mobile devices frequently in their daily lives. Six participants clearly pointed out that mobile phones were good for their better cultural adjustment. Moreover, consciousness and unconsciousness was the second characteristic of the international students' cultural adjustment in the mobile-assisted learning environment. The researchers found that the participants' cultural adjustment in MALL environment was different in terms of consciousness. Four participants were able to take the initiative to use mobile phones to make cultural adjustments, while the other four participants did not realize their behavior of adjustment. Interactivity was a third important feature. For interview questions nine to 12, four participants mentioned the words 'communication' and 'feedback'. Mei Lin mentioned that when she had a problem with her studies, she could get a timely answer by asking the teacher through WeChat.

### **3.2. Affordances of MALL in cultural adjustment of international students**

Three affordances were identified in the study. The first affordance of MALL in cultural adjustment of international students was the use of resources to learn the Chinese language and culture. Seven participants mentioned the use of mobile devices. For interview questions one to four, both Jane and Kim said that the improvement of Chinese proficiency had enhanced their confidence in communicating with Chinese people. Moreover, WeChat data showed that the content of collaborative learning was the most discussed topic. The Chinese students helped participants correct mistakes in their online communication and shared Chinese cultural knowledge, such as Chinese pop songs. Researchers indicated the finding seems similar to previous studies (e.g. [Jin, 2018](#)).

Second, the MALL approach afforded ways for participants to obtain social support. Interview data and WeChat messages showed that all eight participants expressed positive views on their interactions with the Chinese students in cooperative learning activities. Six participants thought that WeChat was beneficial to their exchanges with Chinese students. Jane and Kim said they had established friendships with Chinese students. However, three participants mentioned that differences in social software (e.g. Twitter and Line) had become obstacles to their interaction with Chinese students. Further research is however required to figure out whether participants can become real friends with Chinese students and obtain long-term social support.

Third, mobile tools also provided ways to relieve stress. For interview questions five to 12, two participants said that entertainment resources in WeChat relieved their pressure and helped them face the difficulties of cultural adjustment with a positive attitude. However, Ryo said he preferred to watch videos on YouTube because “most of the videos on WeChat are just for Chinese”. It is suggested that it is necessary to develop entertainment content that is more suitable for international students.

## **4. Conclusions**

This study focused on the cultural adjustment of foreign students studying Chinese as a second language in a mobile-assisted learning environment. Eight international students studying Chinese in China participated in the study. The study used qualitative research methods to analyze online messages of WeChat groups and

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personal in-depth interviews. The researchers identified three characteristics of the international students' cultural adjustment in the mobile-assisted learning environment. Three affordances that the MALL approach brought to students' cultural adjustment were found. Moreover, two suggestions were proposed. One is that emerging technologies could be applied to design Chinese apps that are more suitable for international students. The other is that mobile technology could be used to carry out activities in which Chinese and foreign students participate. Due to the limitations of the study, it is suggested that future research focus on the integration of emerging technologies and MALL, and the design of teaching activities in the MALL environment.

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