

The role of language-related factors in the acculturation of Mainland Chinese students in higher education: A systematic review

Kenton Cheng Tak Chan^{1*} , Katja Lochtmann² , XiaoYu Zhang³ 

¹ Center for Education Quality Management, Macao University of Tourism, Macao SAR, China

² Brussels Center for Language Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

³ Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, City University of Macau, Macao SAR, China

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Abstract

This study aims to systematically analyze and explore the role of language-related variables in the acculturation of mainland Chinese students in higher education settings abroad and in Hong Kong and Macao S.A.R. Recently, there has been a growing interest in research examining the interplay between language-related factors and acculturation across different regional and international contexts. Scholarly literature, including journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters, published from January 2019 to December 2023, was collected through a thorough search of the Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus databases, resulting in an initial sample of N=785. Among them, 16 documents met the rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria and were included in the final review pool. The findings reveal that language-related variables extend far beyond basic proficiency, encompassing a multidimensional interplay of objective linguistic metrics, practical communication barriers, psycholinguistic states, and sociolinguistic dynamics. While foreign and regional language proficiencies are critical, students frequently face obstacles such as unfamiliar accents and the gap between formal and informal speech. Furthermore, psycholinguistic factors like language anxiety and willingness to communicate, alongside sociolinguistic elements like perceived discrimination and locals' communication accommodation, profoundly shape students' academic success, sociocultural integration, and psychological well-being. To navigate these challenges, students employ coping strategies such as adopting English names and consuming host-culture media. By understanding these multifaceted variables, host institutions can move beyond traditional language instruction to develop holistic interventions, such as tandem learning and regional language support, thereby facilitating better cross-cultural adaptation.

Keywords acculturation; adaptation; higher education; language; mainland Chinese students

1. Introduction

In today's era of globalization and internationalization, many students leave their hometowns for higher education studies in other regions and countries. Reasons include expanding their horizons, enhancing professional capabilities, and exploring future career prospects (Hofhuis et al., 2019). Past studies indicate they commonly experience cultural adaptation, also called acculturation, as well as numerous challenges when they relocate and reside in a foreign country (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Researchers have investigated multiple challenges, including cultural adaptation difficulty, academic challenges, and social separation (Wu et al., 2015). While learning a foreign language of the host destination presents many obstacles, it is indeed essential and useful in the acculturation process. Language is a fundamental skill for understanding and interacting with people in social, educational, and work environments, and it can directly affect an individual's adaptation under these contexts (van Niejenhuis et al., 2018). Proficiency in the language of the study destination is positively correlated with international students' academic performance, thereby enhancing their psychological adjustment (Tian & Lu, 2018). However, aside from host language proficiency, a variety of language-related

variables can play different roles in the adaptation process. These variables are not completely covered in the literature, which implies the need for more systematic research in this aspect.

The number of mainland Chinese students studying abroad has been growing for many years. They constitute the largest proportion of international students globally (Miao & Wang, 2024). According to UNESCO (2024), approximately 1,021,303 mainland Chinese students are currently studying abroad. The number of mainland Chinese students studying in the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions (SAR) has also steadily risen (DSEDJ, 2023; SCMP, 2024;). Despite this trend, there has yet to be a dedicated systematic review focusing on language and acculturation issues for this specific student group. The present study seeks to address this gap.

This systematic literature review examines the role of language-related variables in the acculturation process of mainland Chinese university students in a regional and international context. The former refers to mainland Chinese students studying in the Hong Kong and Macao SAR, both of which are part of China. In contrast, the latter pertains to students who pursue their studies in locations outside of China. We sought scholarly literature, including journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters from January 2019 to December 2023, regardless of citation count but with rigorous criteria, using the wide range of literature included in two large academic search engines, i.e., the Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus databases. In the following sections, we will illustrate the concepts of students' adaptation in higher education, the relationship between adaptation and language, discuss the context of the study, outline the review process, present our findings, and conclude with recommendations for future research. To structure the study effectively, three research questions have guided us throughout the investigation.

1. What language-related factors are connected to the acculturation of mainland Chinese students?
2. What does this relationship between language-related variables and acculturation entail for mainland Chinese students?
3. What are the teaching implications?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Acculturation

Cross-cultural adjustment refers to the ongoing process through which people, when they move to new and unfamiliar cultural settings or face changes in their cultural environment, manage to establish, or re-establish, stable, mutually beneficial, and effective interactions with those surroundings (Kim, 2001). In its broader scope, it includes the process of acculturation. The term "acculturation" describes how people change when they interact with a different culture and go through a cultural transformation (Berry & Hou, 2017). One aim of acculturation is to address intercultural inequality by emphasizing the acquisition of a second culture, which applies to all parties involved (Rudmin et al., 2017). Extensive research has contributed to understanding the acculturation process with models and theories. Sam and Berry (2010) introduced four main categories: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Students fall into the categories based on their varying degrees of adjustment to the new environment and their sense of belonging with regard to their place of origin. Lysgaard (1955) introduced the U-Curve model, later expanded by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) to include the stages of re-entry to the original country after individuals return from the host country, which leads to the W-Curve Model. Sociocultural, psychological, and academic adaptations are the three common transformations identified in the acculturation process (Ding, 2016). Groups under study have been temporary residents, refugees, indigenous populations, immigrants, and ethno-cultural communities in a multicultural society (Ward, 2001), while this current review particularly concentrates on mainland Chinese university students, as the rise in their regional and international mobility for study has become a prominent trend in higher education around the world (DSEDJ, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

2.2. Acculturation and Language

Theoretical frameworks such as Language Contact Theory (Matras, 2020) and Second Language Acquisition Theory (Hummel, 2021) provide essential lenses for understanding how linguistic variations and communicative experiences shape learners' adaptation in diverse cultural settings. A number of studies about non-mainland Chinese students have used language-related variables in relation to acculturation research. A study by Lou (2021) examined the relationship between language and identity among students from the Macao SAR while they studied in mainland China. The study found that perceived Chinese Putonghua language

proficiency and national identity play important roles in cultural adaptation. They are mutually related, and the former one is a direct antecedent of academic, social, and psychological adaptation. It showed that Macao SAR students with higher proficiency in Chinese Putonghua perform better in social and academic aspects and may experience lower levels of depression. In another study, Aoyama and Takahashi (2020) investigated 88 Japanese students studying in California, United States. Their study shows a strong correlation between English as second language self-confidence, acculturation, and English as second language willingness to communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre & Wang, 2021). For integratively motivated learners, the positive correlation between second language self-confidence and second language WTC is stronger, while for instrumentally motivated learners, their second language WTC may decline as their time in the United States increases, as they feel satisfied after achieving their practical goals. In addition, Qian and Yu (2023) found that foreign international students with high Chinese language learning anxiety are more likely to experience depression and have a harder time adapting to campus life in mainland China. Interestingly, they also found that higher anxiety levels in students correlate with better academic performance. The study highlighted the mediating roles of academic and campus adaptation abilities in this context. The language-related variables in these cases vary, but they all belong to the second language acquisition (SLA) field. These examples show that language-related variables in SLA significantly affect the adaptation process, though to varying degrees. From these random samples, we believe there are many more aspects of these language-related variables in adaptation that have not been thoroughly found in the literature. Wilczewski and Alon (2023) conducted a bibliometric and content analysis, selecting frequently cited articles on language-related variables in acculturation and communication, but they relied solely on Web of Science Core Collection as their search engine. Their source dated back until 2021, covering studies from 1993 onwards. They found that second language proficiency is associated with better academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation for students studying abroad, but this relationship is complex and influenced by various factors like global competence and social interactions. Our systematic review differs from their study by utilizing two main data search engines: Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus. We focused on research published during the last 5 years (2019-2023) and specifically examined mainland Chinese university students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Screening

The objective of the present study is to conduct a comprehensive and systematic review of the role of language-related variables in relation to the acculturation of mainland Chinese students in higher education in regional and international contexts and to facilitate a thorough and accurate interpretation of the existing body of research in this field, while also providing valuable insights to guide future research endeavors. To compile relevant documents for review, we adhered to the established PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and employed identification and selection strategies. Specifically, we utilized specific keywords in the Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus databases.

Three processes comprised our progressive method for creating the pool of documents. They were 1) choosing reliable and renowned journal search channels; 2) running a search; 3) deciding which documents to include for the review. Our goal was to obtain a thorough coverage by compiling all publications related to acculturation and language. The search and inclusion process, depicted in Figure 1, will be further explained. By reading a few studies related to our research topic, we used the following keywords that frequently appear in the topics and abstracts of related publications, following the Boolean logic: (“international student*” OR “foreign student*” OR “overseas student*”) AND (“language*”) AND (“adapt*” OR “adjust*” OR “integrate*” OR “acculturate*” OR “cross-cultural communication” OR “intercultural communication”). A number of keywords for the Boolean logic were derived from the research conducted by Wilczewski and Alon (2023), as their work to some extent shares similarities with our study. Yet, there are notable differences in terms of research method, year range coverage, and journal range coverage.

Being of particular significance, the keywords “cross-cultural communication” and “intercultural communication” were added and employed in the search. The concepts of acculturation and intercultural communication are related but distinctive. Acculturation is a complex process that involves developing a relationship with a new culture. It happens when two cultures come into direct and constant contact over time (Berry, 2005). Intercultural communication is a broad term in applied linguistics and communication that includes acculturation. To prevent inadvertently excluding relevant documents that discuss acculturation but are concealed under the broader category of intercultural communication, “cross-cultural communication” and “intercultural communication” were also included as keywords while searching.

One challenge in this study was that not all the relevant documents explicitly mention “mainland Chinese students” in the title or abstract, even if the content is about them. Hence, the initial search strategy did not immediately include “Chinese” as a keyword. Instead, a broader term like “international” was used to cast a wider net. After the initial search, the research team carefully screened the titles, abstracts, and contents to determine if the documents were specifically about mainland Chinese students studying in a particular region or abroad.

The inclusion criteria for the studies were: (1) linguistics or a language factor as a variable in the research study; (2) related to acculturation; (3) targeted participants such as mainland Chinese university students in the Hong Kong or Macao SAR or abroad; (4) pursued a long-term study with students residing in the host regions or countries; (5) empirical studies; (6) studies written in English; (7) journal articles, conference proceedings, or book chapters; (8) acculturation during the study period instead of pre-acculturation upon arrival; (9) well-structured research with sufficient data and clear findings; (10) dated from January 2019 – December 2023 (including articles published online first during this period but assigned to later journal volumes).

An Excel file was created using the Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus databases to compile the searched documents (n=785). We followed the PRISMA guidelines to locate and delete repeated and withdrawn entries (n = 81), and thereafter checked them manually. Due to the difficulty in ascertaining the presence of language-related variables from titles alone, the abstract review process was utilized extensively over the title review process to ensure the accurate exclusion of non-pertinent documents (n = 528). Six documents could not be retrieved. Ultimately, the dataset was refined by eliminating documents during the full-text review phase for specific reasons (n = 154). To ensure methodological transparency, the excluded full-text documents were categorized as follows: not having a language-related variable or theme; not about mainland Chinese university students in certain regions or abroad; only part of the sample was constituted of mainland Chinese students but not all; and not an empirical study. 16 filtered documents were included in the final review pool for analysis, as shown in Figure 1.

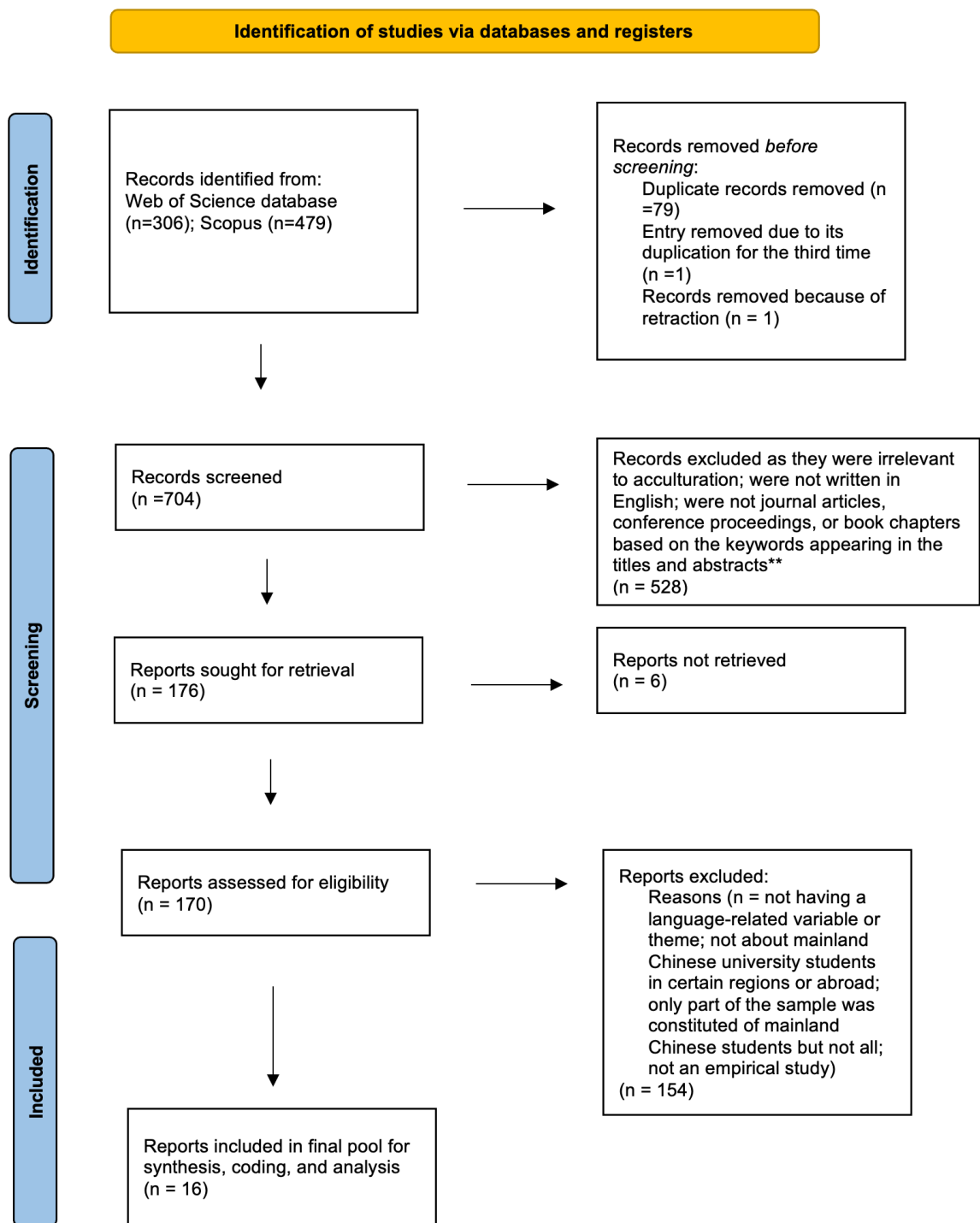


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart illustrating the process of article identification, screening, and inclusion in the systematic review

Table 1. Summary of research methods, target languages, and language-related variables of the 16 selected studies

No.	Researchers	Research methods	Target Language	Regions or countries	Language-related variables	Setting
1	Almazova et al. (2020)	Mixed	Russian	Russia	Foreign language proficiency in SLA; foreign language barrier in SLA	Academic Non-academic
2	Cao & Meng (2019)	Quantitative	English, French, Dutch	Belgium	Foreign language proficiency in SLA	Academic Non-academic
3	Jia & Koku (2019)	Quantitative	English	United States	English songs / sociolinguistics	Non-academic
4	Jiang & Altinyelken (2022)	Qualitative	English, Dutch	Netherlands	Foreign language barrier in SLA	Academic Non-academic
5	Jiang et al. (2021)	Qualitative	English	Denmark	Foreign language barrier in SLA	Academic
6	Lai et al. (2023)	Quantitative	English	United States	Foreign language proficiency in SLA; foreign language barrier in SLA	Academic Non-academic
7	Li (2019)	Qualitative	English, German	Finland, Germany	Foreign language barrier in SLA	Academic
8	Liu et al. (2022)	Qualitative	English	United Kingdom	Foreign language barrier in SLA	Academic Non-academic
9	Ma & Holford (2024)	Qualitative	English, Chinese (Cantonese)	Hong Kong SAR	Regional language barrier in SLA	Academic Non-academic
10	Sun et al. (2021)	Quantitative	English	United States	Perceived language discrimination / sociolinguistics, foreign language proficiency in SLA	Academic Non-academic
11	Wilson et al. (2020)	Quantitative	English	United States	Foreign language proficiency in SLA	Academic Non-academic
12	Wu et al. (2025)	Quantitative	Cantonese	Hong Kong SAR	Regional language anxiety in SLA, Regional language competence in SLA, Regional confidence in SLA, Regional willingness to communicate in SLA	Non-academic
13	Wu et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Cantonese	Hong Kong SAR	Regional language barrier in SLA	Non-academic
14	Yu et al. (2019)	Quantitative	English, Cantonese	Hong Kong SAR	Regional language proficiency in SLA; Foreign language proficiency in SLA	Academic
15	Zhai & Razali (2022)	Qualitative	English	Malaysia	Foreign language barrier in SLA	Academic
16	Zhang & Noels (2024)	Mixed	English	Canada	English names / sociolinguistics	Academic Non-academic

Note: It should be noted that some articles were initially published online between 2019 and 2023 before being assigned to a journal volume in a subsequent year. Consequently, while some citation years in parentheses may appear to fall outside the 2019–2023 timeframe, these articles still meet our search inclusion criteria.

4. Findings

4.1. What language-related factors are connected to the acculturation of mainland Chinese students?

The acculturation of mainland Chinese students in higher education institutions outside of mainland China is a multifaceted process heavily influenced by a diverse array of language-related factors. Based on a comprehensive review of recent empirical studies, these factors can be broadly categorized into foreign and regional language proficiency, language barriers and communication obstacles, psycholinguistic variables, and sociolinguistic/interpersonal elements.

4.1.1. Foreign and Local Language Proficiency

The most frequently identified language-related factor is the students' proficiency in the host institution's medium of instruction, predominantly English, as well as the local language of the host country. English language ability (ELA) is a critical determinant of how well students navigate their new environments (Wilson et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2019). In non-English speaking European countries, the dual requirement of mastering both English and the local language (e.g., Dutch, German, or French) introduces a complex linguistic dynamic. For instance, Cao and Meng (2019) highlight that both English and local language proficiency act as exogenous variables that significantly influence social connectedness in Belgium. Similarly, Jiang and Altinyelken (2022)

note that a lack of fluency in both English and Dutch hampers mainland Chinese students' academic adjustment and their ability to socialize in the Netherlands. In Russia, Russian language proficiency is the primary linguistic factor, where tandem language learning has been shown to directly impact the sociocultural adaptation of Chinese students (Almazova et al., 2020).

4.1.2. Regional Language Competence

For mainland Chinese students studying in the Hong Kong SAR, regional language competence, specifically Cantonese, emerges as a unique and vital factor. Although English is the medium of instruction and Mandarin is widely understood, Cantonese remains the predominant language for day-to-day social interactions (Wu et al., 2025). Studies by Yu et al. (2019) and Wu et al. (2024) identify perceived Cantonese competence as a distinct variable separate from general foreign language proficiency. Furthermore, Ma and Holford (2024) identify the active learning of Cantonese as a specific coping strategy employed by mainland students to navigate the complex socio-political and cultural landscape of Hong Kong, highlighting regional language acquisition as a proactive acculturation factor.

4.1.3. Language Barriers and Communication Obstacles

Beyond formal proficiency scores, specific language barriers act as negative factors in the acculturation process. These barriers often manifest as difficulties with local accents, the speed of speech, and the gap between formal classroom language and informal, real-life expressions. Li (2019) points out that Chinese students in Germany and Finland struggle with the transition from passive knowledge reception to active knowledge production, heavily constrained by their foreign language capabilities. In the U.K., Liu et al. (2022) found that limited oral English fluency and difficulties understanding thick local accents were long-standing challenges that persisted even during the COVID-19 pandemic. In academic settings, particularly those utilizing Problem-Based Learning (PBL), language barriers restrict students' ability to engage in group discussions, leading to feelings of helplessness and separation (Jiang et al., 2021). Zhai and Razali (2022) also emphasize that unfamiliarity with the Malaysian-English accent and localized expressions serves as a significant communication obstacle for Chinese postgraduates in Malaysia.

4.1.4. Psycholinguistic and Affective Variables

The psychological relationship students have with the target language is just as critical as their objective proficiency. Key psycholinguistic factors include language use anxiety, language confidence, and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a second language. Wu et al. (2024, 2025) utilize the L2 WTC framework to demonstrate that "Cantonese use anxiety" directly and negatively impacts "Cantonese confidence" and the willingness to communicate with Hong Kong locals. High language anxiety often leads to avoidance behaviors, where students retreat to their native Mandarin. Conversely, academic self-efficacy and linguistic confidence are strong predictors of successful cross-cultural adaptation, as they empower students to step out of their comfort zones and engage with the host culture (Yu et al., 2019).

4.1.5. Sociolinguistic and Interpersonal Factors

Finally, acculturation is deeply connected to sociolinguistic variables that dictate how language is used and perceived in social contexts. One major factor is language-based discrimination, defined as being treated unfairly due to speaking with a non-native accent or having English as a second language. Sun et al. (2021) identify perceived language discrimination as a severe stressor that negatively impacts the mental health of Chinese international students in the US.

Another crucial factor is communication accommodation by host nationals. Wu et al. (2024, 2025) apply Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to show that locals' accommodative behaviors (e.g., code-switching to Mandarin, slowing down speech, or using gestures) serve as positive language-related factors that encourage mainland students to interact. Conversely, non-accommodative behaviors (e.g., impatience or refusal to interact) act as deterrents.

Also, sociolinguistic habits, such as media consumption, play a role. Jia and Koku (2019) found that the language of the music students choose to listen to (English vs. Chinese songs) is a sociolinguistic variable that correlates with their cultural adaptation strategies, with English music listening linked to higher adaptation to American culture. Furthermore, the adoption of English names by Chinese students in Canada is a sociolinguistic strategy used to bypass name-based discrimination and facilitate smoother cross-cultural communication (Zhang & Noels, 2024).

In summary, the language-related factors connected to the acculturation of mainland Chinese students are highly diverse. They range from objective linguistic metrics (English, local, and regional language proficiency) and practical communication barriers (accents, vocabulary) to internal psycholinguistic states (anxiety, confidence, WTC) and external sociolinguistic dynamics (language discrimination, communication accommodation, and media consumption).

4.2. What does this relationship between language-related variables and acculturation entail for mainland Chinese students?

The relationship between language-related variables and acculturation has profound entailments for mainland Chinese students, directly shaping their academic success, sociocultural integration, and psychological well-being. Language is not merely a tool for information exchange; it is the primary medium through which these students negotiate their identities, build support networks, and manage the stress of living in a foreign environment. The entailments of these language variables can be observed across three main dimensions of adaptation: academic, sociocultural, and psychological.

4.2.1. Entailments for Academic Adaptation

Language proficiency and communication barriers directly dictate the trajectory of a student's academic adaptation. High English or local language proficiency is consistently linked to better academic outcomes. For instance, Cao and Meng (2019) demonstrate that English proficiency significantly predicts academic adaptation among Chinese students in Belgium, partially mediated by social support. Conversely, language deficiencies entail severe academic friction. Li (2019) notes that in Germany and Finland, language barriers force Chinese students to rely heavily on rote learning, not necessarily as a surface-level strategy, but as a compensatory pathway to achieve deep understanding when foreign language comprehension fails them.

Furthermore, language variables dictate how students seek academic help. Wilson et al. (2020) found that Chinese first-year students in the US with lower English Language Ability (ELA) seek advice from domestic friends less frequently and perceive the advice they do receive as lower in quality. This limits their access to valuable “insider” academic knowledge. In collaborative settings like Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Denmark, language barriers can lead to marginalization within group work, prompting students to adopt “separation” strategies where they withdraw from intercultural teamwork and attempt to complete projects independently, often leading to immense academic stress (Jiang et al., 2021). To cope, students must proactively engage in self-learning and seek oral academic English training to survive in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environments (Zhai & Razali, 2022).

4.2.2. Entailments for Sociocultural Integration

The relationship between language and acculturation heavily entails how mainland Chinese students navigate their social worlds. Language proficiency acts as a gatekeeper to host-national networks. According to Cao and Meng (2019), both English and local language proficiency account for a significant variance in students' social connectedness within the mainstream society. When students lack the linguistic confidence or ability to engage, they experience profound social segregation. Jiang and Altinyelken (2022) highlight that in the Netherlands, language comprehension issues and an inability to understand local humor or “party culture” lead Chinese students to retreat into co-national networks (e.g., relying entirely on WeChat groups for social life and information). While these co-national networks provide safety, they limit deeper sociocultural integration.

In the unique context of Hong Kong, the entailments of the regional language (Cantonese) are highly nuanced. While Mandarin and English might suffice for basic academic survival, a lack of Cantonese proficiency entails social exclusion and superficial relationships with locals (Wu et al., 2024, 2025). When students perceive accommodative behaviors from locals (e.g., locals patiently code-switching or gesturing), it lowers their language anxiety and increases their WTC in Cantonese, which subsequently enhances their frequency and quality of contact with the host community (Wu et al., 2024, 2025). Therefore, the sociolinguistic environment directly entails whether a student feels like an integrated member of the community or a perpetual outsider.

4.2.3. Entailments for Psychological Well-being and Identity

Perhaps the most severe entailments of language-related variables are psychological. Language barriers and the resulting communication failures are primary sources of acculturative stress, anxiety, and depression. Sun et al. (2021) reveal that perceived language-based discrimination (e.g., being ignored or treated as inferior due to an accent) is significantly associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety among Chinese students in the U.S. Interestingly, Sun et al. (2021) found that social connectedness with host students

(American students) buffered this negative mental health impact, whereas connectedness with fellow Chinese students did not, underscoring the psychological necessity of bridging the linguistic divide with the host culture.

The psychological entailments also extend to identity negotiation. In Hong Kong, where socio-political tensions exist, language choice is highly politicized. Speaking Mandarin can sometimes invite hostility or stereotyping, leading to psychological distress and a sense of being discriminated against (Ma & Holford, 2024; Wu et al., 2024, 2025). Consequently, students must constantly negotiate their identities through language. Adopting the host language or engaging with host media becomes a psychological coping mechanism. For example, Jia and Koku (2019) found that listening to English songs helps Chinese students in the US manage negative moods and facilitates the formation of an American cultural identity, whereas relying solely on Chinese music is often linked to negative mood management and homesickness. Similarly, participating in tandem language learning, where Chinese students pair with local host nationals to exchange languages, has been shown to drastically reduce sociocultural anxiety and accelerate psychological adjustment by fostering genuine, reciprocal relationships (Almazova et al., 2020).

4.3. What are the teaching implications?

Based on the findings of the 16 reviewed studies published between 2019 and 2023, several pedagogical implications can be drawn to better prepare mainland Chinese students for their academic and social acculturation abroad or in the Hong Kong and Macao SARs. Instead of relying on general language teaching frameworks, educators and host institutions should tailor their instructional strategies to address the specific linguistic and sociolinguistic challenges identified in this review.

4.3.1. Bridging the Gap Between Classroom Language and Real-Life Usage

A recurrent challenge identified in the reviewed literature is the disconnect between formal language learned in the classroom and the informal, practical language used in real-life settings (Li, 2019). Furthermore, variations in accents often hinder students' academic and social communication (Wilson et al., 2020). Therefore, pre-departure and in-session language courses should shift away from strictly standardized, test-oriented materials. Educators should expose students to diverse global accents and authentic conversational data. For students entering EMI environments, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) training should specifically address real-time academic interactions, such as participating in seminars and communicating with supervisors, rather than focusing solely on academic reading and writing (Zhai & Razali, 2022).

4.3.2. Promoting Tandem Learning and Reducing Language Anxiety

Language-use anxiety significantly impacts mainland Chinese students' WTC and their overall psychological adaptation (Wu et al., 2025). To mitigate this anxiety, institutions should actively implement and promote "tandem language learning" programs. As demonstrated by Almazova et al. (2020), pairing mainland Chinese students with native speakers of the host language for reciprocal learning not only accelerates language proficiency but also significantly improves sociocultural adjustment. Creating a low-anxiety, supportive environment where students feel encouraged to practice without fear of making errors is crucial for building their communicative confidence.

4.3.3. Incorporating Sociolinguistic Elements and Popular Culture

The review highlights that sociolinguistic factors, such as listening to English songs and adopting English names, play unique roles in facilitating cultural adaptation. Jia and Koku (2019) found that listening to English songs correlates with better adaptation to the host culture. Consequently, language instructors should integrate popular culture, media, and music into their curricula to familiarize students with the cultural nuances and informal expressions of the host society. Additionally, educators should guide students in understanding the pragmatic and social implications of adopting host-language names (e.g., English names), as this practice can promote cross-cultural communication and strengthen connections with the host community while allowing students to maintain their native cultural identity (Zhang & Noels, 2024).

4.3.4. Providing Regional and Third-Language Support

For students studying in regions like Hong Kong or non-English-speaking countries in Europe, mastering a regional dialect (e.g., Cantonese) or a third host language is vital for deep social integration (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Yu et al., 2019;). Although Cantonese may not be strictly necessary for academic survival, Wu et al. (2024) emphasize that regional language proficiency is a significant facilitator for psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Host institutions should offer accessible, practical courses in the regional or local host

language, focusing on daily survival communication (e.g., shopping, asking for directions). Furthermore, educators should raise students' awareness of communication accommodation strategies, teaching them how to navigate multilingual environments and interpret the accommodating behaviors (e.g., code-switching, gesturing) of local residents to foster positive intercultural interactions.

5. Discussion

This systematic review synthesizes recent empirical literature (2019–2023) to illuminate the multifaceted role of language-related variables in the acculturation of mainland Chinese students in regional and international higher education settings. The findings reveal that language is far more than a mere academic prerequisite or a tool for basic information exchange; rather, it is a complex, multidimensional construct that fundamentally dictates students' academic survival, sociocultural integration, and psychological well-being. By moving beyond traditional metrics of language proficiency, this review underscores the critical interplay between psycholinguistic states, sociolinguistic environments, and cross-cultural adaptation.

A primary theme emerging from the reviewed studies is the inadequacy of formal, classroom-based language proficiency in ensuring successful acculturation. While high English Language Ability (ELA) remains a strong predictor of academic adaptation (Cao & Meng, 2019; Wilson et al., 2020), students frequently encounter a jarring disconnect between standardized test English and the authentic, informal language used in real-life settings. This gap is exacerbated by unfamiliar local accents, rapid speech, and colloquialisms, which serve as persistent communication obstacles (Liu et al., 2022; Zhai & Razali, 2022). Furthermore, the linguistic burden is significantly heavier for students in non-English speaking countries (e.g., the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and Russia) and in the Hong Kong SAR. In these contexts, students must navigate a dual-language or multi-language dynamic. The literature clearly indicates that while English may suffice for academic coursework, proficiency in the local or regional language (such as Dutch, German, Russian, or Cantonese) acts as the ultimate gatekeeper to deep sociocultural integration and the formation of host-national networks (Almazova et al., 2020; Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Wu et al., 2025).

Equally significant are the psycholinguistic and affective variables that shape a student's acculturation trajectory. The review highlights that objective language proficiency is often superseded by subjective language confidence and WTC. High language-use anxiety frequently drives mainland Chinese students into protective, co-national social bubbles, limiting their exposure to the host culture and perpetuating a cycle of social exclusion (Wu et al., 2025). This social segregation has severe academic entailments, particularly in collaborative learning environments like Problem-Based Learning (PBL), where language barriers can lead to marginalization and immense academic stress (Jiang et al., 2021).

Moreover, the acculturation process is deeply embedded in sociolinguistic and interpersonal dynamics. The reviewed studies demonstrate that adaptation is a two-way street, heavily influenced by the host community's receptiveness. Perceived language-based discrimination, such as being treated as inferior due to a non-native accent, emerges as a profound stressor that directly correlates with depression and anxiety (Sun et al., 2021). Conversely, when host nationals engage in communication accommodation (e.g., adjusting speech speed, gesturing, or code-switching), it significantly lowers students' anxiety and fosters a sense of belonging (Wu et al., 2024, 2025). To navigate these complex dynamics, mainland Chinese students employ unique sociolinguistic coping strategies, such as adopting English names to bypass bias (Zhang & Noels, 2024) or consuming host-culture media, like English music, to manage negative emotions and construct a bicultural identity (Jia & Koku, 2019).

The pedagogical implications drawn from these findings suggest a paradigm shift in how host institutions support international students. Interventions must move beyond traditional EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classes. Implementing tandem language learning, integrating popular culture into curricula, and providing survival-based regional language support are vital steps toward bridging the gap between international students and host communities.

While this review provides a comprehensive overview, it is limited to studies published between 2019 and 2023 indexed in Web of Science and Scopus. Furthermore, as with any systematic review, the retrieved results are sensitive to the exact time the database searches were conducted. Since academic databases are continuously updated, readers should interpret the findings within this temporal context, and future researchers should acknowledge the inherent variability of search results when replicating the search at different points in time. The focus on mainland Chinese students, while providing necessary specificity, means

the findings may not be entirely generalizable to other international student populations. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how these language-related variables and their entailments evolve over the entire duration of a student's degree. Also, more research is needed from the perspective of the host nationals to better understand the reciprocal nature of communication accommodation and intercultural integration.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review highlights the profound and multidimensional role that language-related variables play in the acculturation of mainland Chinese students in higher education institutions abroad and in the Hong Kong and Macao SARs. Synthesizing 16 empirical studies published between 2019 and 2023, the findings demonstrate that cross-cultural adaptation extends far beyond basic second language acquisition. Instead, a student's academic success, sociocultural integration, and psychological well-being are intricately tied to a complex web of linguistic proficiencies, psycholinguistic states (such as language anxiety and Willingness to Communicate), and sociolinguistic realities (including language-based discrimination and communication accommodation). The evidence clearly shows that while English proficiency is crucial for academic survival, mastery of local or regional languages, alongside the ability to navigate informal communication and local accents, is the true catalyst for deep social integration. Furthermore, the psychological toll of language barriers and discrimination underscores the urgent need for holistic institutional support. To foster truly inclusive international higher education environments, host institutions must transcend traditional, test-oriented language instruction. By implementing tandem learning programs, offering practical regional language support, and educating both international and domestic students on communication accommodation, universities can significantly ease the acculturative burden. Ultimately, understanding and addressing these nuanced language-related variables will not only enhance the educational journey of mainland Chinese students but also enrich the multicultural fabric of global higher education.

Kenton Cheng Tak Chan (Corresponding Author) is a lecturer at the Centre for Education Quality Management, Macao University of Tourism. He is pursuing a PhD degree in Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His research interests are intercultural communication, tourism and education. Email: kenton@utm.edu.mo

Katja Lochtmán is a professor in German as a foreign language, second language acquisition, foreign language pedagogy, and German linguistics. Her academic research and work focus on understanding how learners acquire the German language, applying linguistic theories to develop effective teaching methodologies, and advancing the overall field of language education. Email: katja.Lochtmán@vub.be

XiaoYu Zhang holds a Bachelor's degree in English from the City University of Macau and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in English Studies at the University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include TESOL, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and cross-cultural studies. She is also deeply passionate about Western modern and contemporary literature, particularly mystery and detective fiction. Email: zhang_xiaoyu0226@163.com

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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