



Research Article

An Ethnography of Bangladeshi Students' Chinese Learning Experiences in China During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In a globalized era, Chinese language is becoming a global language to learn for international students. Under China's Belt and Road Initiative, an increasing number of South-Asian students come to China for receiving higher education. Based on a longitudinal ethnography conducted at a university in Yunnan, China, this study explores the Chinese learning experiences of a cohort of Bangladeshi students who are majored in TCSOL (Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Informed by the notions of language ideologies, this study explores what language-related challenges might impede their academic performance and social integration, and how their educational aspirations are constrained by various social factors mediated in the process of public crisis. Findings indicate that students' insufficient Chinese linguistic competence fails to accommodate curriculum requirements, with linguistic obstacles substantially hindering academic attainment. Online pedagogy generates adverse outcomes including reduced student involvement and insufficient teacher-student interaction. Despite auxiliary learning resources, pandemic-induced HSK test disruptions render students passive in academic aspiration formation. The study also argues that the diverse language acquisition trajectories of multilingual international learners offer alternative perspectives to the prevalent discourse regarding English's dominant position as a global medium for cross-cultural communication. The study sheds some lights on the cross-border education in the shifting paradigm of global emergency. The study also provides implications for educational practice and language policy for China's promotion of Chinese as a global language.

Keywords

Bangladeshi University Students, COVID-19 Crisis Communication, China

1. Introduction

The rise of China as a major economic power has drawn worldwide attention over the past decades. Concomitant with its rapid economic expansion is China's apparent increasing global influence via its soft power projection [11]. In order to enhance China's soft power globally, Chinese language has

been promoted internationally and learning Chinese to strengthen ties with China has become a necessity for many countries in the globalized era [6]. According to the Ministry of Education, the number of international students studying in China reached 397635 in 2015 [27]. By 2018, the total number

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of international students receiving their higher education in China was almost 500,000 [17]. Under China's Belt and Road Initiative, China has actively extended economic and cultural cooperation with its neighboring countries. Yunnan, located at the Southwest frontier of China, is the China's window and bridgehead to Southeast Asia and South Asia. Due to its geographical advantages, Yunnan plays a vital role in the economic trade and educational cooperation between China and neighboring countries. In Yunnan, over 80 percent of international students are from Southeast Asia and South Asia [28].

For the purpose of deepening cultural exchanges between China and South Asian countries and promoting the localization of Chinese language teachers, in 2015, Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters) launches the "Confucius Institute Scholarship: Professional Development for Chinese Language Teachers in South Asian Countries". In 2017, over 100 Bangladeshi students was recruited to Yunnan for learning Chinese language under the Confucius Institute Scholarship Programme. This cultural exchange is also in response to the increased demand for Chinese language talents in Bangladesh. However, in December 2019, a pneumonia of unknown cause emerged. Subsequently, the pneumonia was found to be caused by novel coronavirus and was named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO). The COVID-19 pandemic, for its rapid spread, wide transmission routes, long incubation period and great number of asymptomatic infections, has emerged as a global public health crisis and has brought incalculable harm and loss to the health and economy of the world [16]. Under such critical circumstances, the education of international students were confronted with unprecedented difficulties and challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on International Students Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many scholars studies have been conducted to investigate international students education in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kanwar and Carr, in 2020, examine the personal impact of COVID-19 on international students facing delays or obstacles to program completion, employment and/or immigration [9]. Though the global crisis result in certain risks and losses in the short term, the demand for international education and benefits it offers are expected to increase. This study states that the crisis presents an opportunity for higher education institutions and government to explore new models and entail a redefined approaches of policies and programmes for future emergency. Sari and Nayir in 2020, reveal the perceptions of the teachers, administrators, and academics who has experienced distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic about the problems and the strategies to cope with the challenges. The findings indicate that teachers and students

have difficulties in internet access and lack of infrastructure, classroom management and human resources. In order to deal with these problems with new arrangements regarding the classroom management, getting help from colleagues, family members and experts and communicating with students and parents [22]. In 2020, Daniel also highlights that in ramping up capacity to teach remotely during the COVID-19, schools and colleges should take advantage of asynchronous learning, which works best in digital formats. Teaching should include varied assignments and personalized needs of international students. The study suggests flexible ways to repair the damage to students' learning trajectories once the pandemic is over [4].

In the context of China, Shi and Wang, in 2021, analyze current situation of online Chinese language teaching among international students who receive higher education in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study, by collecting data from questionnaire and interview, reveals potential problems including limited online teaching resources, less participation of students, little interactions and tedious teaching, etc. The study also puts forward to construct a professional and efficient online Chinese teaching platform with dynamic resources, to build a virtual language learning community to increase the effective and personalized interaction between teachers and students, and construct the student-centered self-learning mode to adapt to actual situation of online teaching [23]. Ma's study explores the challenges of international students management in universities in the context of COVID-19 in 2020. For instance, in order reduce risk of infection, it is quite necessary to implement 24-hour-closed management within students' dormitory area and release the latest notices and information about pandemic in time. As the lockdown get longer, the psychological pressure of international students on campus and those who stay off campus becomes more and prominent. It is particularly important to provide psychological counselling and comfort during the prevention period. University administrators should offer translation support with counselling center and actively respond to the help from students inside and outside school. In addition, the management department should work with teachers to ensure the quality of online class and minimize the negative impact of students' study during the pandemic [16]. Li et al. investigate multilingual communication experiences of international students during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020. Based on semi-structured interviews with 10 international students from South Asia and Southeast Asia receiving their higher education in China. The study demonstrate the language-related challenges international students encounter, that is, their Chinese and English proficiency is insufficient to meet their crisis communication needs and English-mediated class content. It also reveals how international students mobilize their multilingual resources to enhance their access to crisis communication and how their multilingual competences are valorized and enacted in the shifting paradigm of China-oriented new economy addressing mutual accountability in South-South cooperation [14].

2.2. Language Ideology as Theoretical Framework

Language ideologies refers to the perceptions and conceptions held by language users' about a language and language practices in a given society [12]. Language ideologies are systems of socially, culturally, and historically conditioned ideas, images and perceptions about language and communication [1]. They comprise the “representations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world” [25]. Language ideologies are social constructs that reflect the historical roles, economic values, political power, and social functions of a particular language [3]. Silverstein, in 1979, also illustrates that the sets of language ideologies include beliefs about the status of languages, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of some expressions in particular contexts, and ways of spreading to rationalize and justify their uses [24]. Thus, language ideologies undergird language use, which in turn shapes language ideologies, and they serve social ends [20].

By reviewing the development of global languages, due to the political and economic hegemony brought by the UK and USA, English language has been constructed as a global language [2] and its influences have ideologically expanded into different fields of social life for different social uses in global context [5]. The term “linguistic imperialism” proposed by Phillipson in 1992 is in response to the phenomenon of English globalization and English hegemony. “Linguistic imperialism is referred as the dominance of English asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and

other languages” [18]. In the past decades, most countries outside the Anglosphere have invested heavily in ramping up their English capacities [19, 21, 26]. In China, English is imagined as the solution to any intercultural communication problems and Putonghua is considered as the exclusive national language, which is called English-mediated multilingualism [14] as a form of ingrained language ideology in the globalized era.

Based on the previous studies on international students education during the COVID-19 pandemic and adopting language ideology as theoretical framework, this study aims to explore the language learning experiences of international students from Bangladesh receiving their higher education in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two questions are to be explored:

How do language-related challenges impede Bangladeshi students' academic performance?

How are their educational aspirations constrained by social factors mediated in public crisis?

3. Methodology

This study adopts a sociolinguistic ethnographic approach [7] to explore language learning experiences and practices of Bangladeshi students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected and gathered in a natural and ongoing way, mainly through participant observation, semi-structured interviews (individual and group interviews), audio-recording, collecting relevant documents, and online interaction with Bangladeshi students. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Code	Gender	Country of origin	Major	Languages
P1	M	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, English, Chinese, Arabic, Hindi
P2	F	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, English, Chinese, Hindi
P3	M	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, English, Chinese
P4	M	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, Chinese
P5	F	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, Chinese
P6	M	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, English, Chinese
P7	F	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, English, Chinese
P8	F	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, English, Chinese
P9	M	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, Chinese, Hindi
P10	M	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, Chinese
P11	M	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, Chinese
P12	M	Bangladesh	TCSOL	Bangla, English, Chinese

Note: TCSOL (Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages)

The study were conducted from May 2020 to March 2021. Some participants (P1, P4, P6, P7, P9, P12) has stayed in China while others (P2, P3, P5, P8, P10, P11) had returned to Bangladesh before the outbreak. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online and either in English or Chinese based on the preference of participants. Data were analyzed by content analysis to identify emerging themes and patterns in the study. Content analysis has been broadly defined as “any technique for making inference by objectively and systemically identifying specified characteristics of messages” [8]. This method allows researchers to identify general themes and to generalise specific themes after interactively data coding and in-depth analysis in explicit and implicit ways [10-13].

4. Results

4.1. Unexpected Challenges of Online Instruction

Since the outbreak of COVID 19 pandemic, the way of having classes online has been carried out throughout the world. The participants mainly adopt “Tencent”, “DingTalk” and “Zoom” online platforms for rich functionality across time and space. However, the downsides of online instruction still outweigh its advantages. Online classes indeed frustrated all participants in many ways.

First, they failed to fully understand difficult courses for their insufficient language proficiency. All the participants in this study had 12 online courses for three semesters in total. Eight courses are available with printed books. For those who stayed in Bangladesh, they only get scanned books. The learning resources for courses without books are teachers’ PPT and class-recording. Most courses are rather theoretical like Ancient Chinese Literature, Chinese History, Linguistics, and Thesis Writing, etc. The learning content is beyond students’ ability with the following justification:

“Ancient Literature is the most difficult course. I can't learn it on the Internet. It is difficult for us to read ancient Chinese. I failed the online exam, and I lost my scholarship.” (Interview with participant 1)

Second, without teachers’ face-to-face teaching, it is quite challenged for them to perfect academic performance by themselves. As P2 reports that sometimes teachers cannot trace whether the students are seriously learning or not and explicate what knowledge students do not understand in time, online classes reveals less participation, attention and interaction of students in the other side of digital devices.

In addition, online instruction should be successfully conducted via equipment in good condition. However, in Bangladesh, the obstructed network gave students unlimited inconvenience, which hindered their learning outcomes.

“The network at my home is not good, and the line is often

dropped. In class, I cannot listen to teachers clearly, and understand a lot of questions. The situation is terribly bad”. (Interview with P3)

Being confronted with various difficulties of online learning, the participants actively overcome them in two ways. First, they asked Chinese friends for help. As a reliable researcher and helper, I often clarified some questions for them and language points after class. Second, they fully utilized online learning resources like translation apps, relevant articles and videos.

4.2. Educational Restrictions from HSK

Influenced by the COVID 19 pandemic, HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, the standard Chinese proficiency test) and HSKK (Hanyu Shuiping Kouyu Kaoshi, oral Chinese test) in mainland China and parts of countries overseas have been postponed or canceled. Although the Chinese Testing International Co., Ltd. (CTI), have launched Online Chinese Test (Home Edition), to help Chinese learners complete HSK exams at home with remote monitoring from test centers, my participants in Bangladesh did not have the ideal equipment to meet the requirements of tests including computer, software configuration, network and examination environment. Some participants who kept staying in Yunnan, China also lost chances to participate in HSK offline exams. Participant 1 have tried to go for other cities to take exams several times. However, due to the uncertain spread of pandemic, the tests he ever registered all canceled like in Guangzhou and Hainan.

In fact, HSK tests are of greatest importance for international students studying in China. HSK certificate is the prerequisite for graduation. In October 2018, the Ministry of Education of China officially issued the Higher Education Quality Standard for International Students and stipulated that HSK Band 5 is the basis for Chinese language majors upon graduation. However, in the period of public crisis, all the participants’ educational aspirations are constrained by changeable social security and unclear test admission.

In 2017, all my participants came to China for higher education under Confucius Institute Scholarship: Professional Development for Chinese Language Teachers in South Asian Countries launched by Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters). They were required to pass all school exams during four academic years and HSK-6 in third year for constantly receiving scholarship. But various factors like the outbreak of pandemic, less engagement in online class and failure in school exams, losing HSK test opportunities and scholarship all restricted my participants’ educational aspirations. The severest aspect turned to financial support. After his scholarship was canceled, Participant 1 did his utmost to survive in China and support himself in continued studies by doing business between Bangladesh and China. He bought cheap Chinese products in Taobao and Alibaba online and transported them to Bangladesh. With the perseverance and strong belief,

he successfully survived and found a job as a university teacher teaching Bangla in Yunnan province.

4.3. Simplified Linguistic Representations in Global Crisis

English today is the undisputed global lingua franca [21]. Undoubtedly, English has been reproduced as a conversational bridge for global communication [13]. Even Chinese language learning materials often use English as the medium for learners of Chinese with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds [5].

At the initial stage of the outbreak, English was the only foreign language in which news about the coronavirus were circulated online [15]. In China, the information about pandemic prevention and global crisis communication are issued in Mandarin and English by official affairs. However, some participants who are unable to fully understand either English or Mandarin has excluded from vital information about global crisis.

"In China, the news is all in Chinese and English. My Chinese and English are not very good. It is difficult to understand the news about the pandemic. Every time I need translation software, but the words are not very accurate. It would be nice to read Bangla version in China." (Interview with P4)

In fact, for the international students who are from non-English speaking countries, despite utilizing translation service on smartphone apps, they cannot escape language-related challenges and communication barrier living in China.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has examined Chinese language experiences of Bangladeshi students receiving higher education in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that their Chinese proficiency is partly deficient to meet the standards of teaching curriculum. The participants are not capable of understand theoretical content knowledge like ancient Chinese literary works, Chinese linguistic concepts, and academic writing patterns, etc. The embedded language challenges, to large extent, impede students' academic performance. A variety of disadvantages of online instruction has created unintended consequences leading to less attention, engagement and efforts of students and interactions with teachers. Although they turn to Chinese friends, translation apps and additional online videos for help, they inevitably are passive in constructing educational aspirations under the worldwide emergency. Besides, in the context of pandemic prevention, the delaying and canceling of HSK tests have caused unexpected problems for Bangladeshi students.

Given the impact of global expansion and globalization, English is constantly reproduced as the best media for intercultural communication. However, this language ideology only facilitates people from English-speaking countries. On

the contrary, the different language learning experiences of international students with diverse linguistic backgrounds have thrown English superiority as global lingua franca into question.

Based on the findings, it is suggested that international students education in global crisis should fully take the huge challenges and difficulties into consideration and follow a flexible and humanized ways to meet educational needs. The study also suggests that in the process of Chinese language promotion, languages of peripheral countries should be valorized to bridge the understanding between China and the world for the leading approach to global governance. This China-oriented multilingualism, embedded in the shifting paradigm of China-led new economy addressing the mutual accountability in South-South cooperation [14].

Abbreviations

HSKK Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi
HSKK Hanyu Shuiping Kouyu Kaoshi

Author Contributions

Wei Duan: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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