



# Cultural Adaptation and Learning of German in a German-Owned Enterprise: A Qualitative Study

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**Abstract.** The research purpose of this study is to explore the cultural adaptation of Chinese employees in a German-owned enterprise and the situation of their German learning. Drawing on in-depth interview data with 5 Chinese employees who have attended the German courses, this article adopts the “W” curve cultural adaptation process. Thematic analysis was conducted. The findings indicated that the employees experienced a range of emotions such as enjoyment, elation, anxiety, and depression during the cultural adaptation process. Apart from the emotional feelings, the employees also reported that their German learning would also be affected by different stages of cultural adaptation. This paper contributes to inspire the research on cultural adaptation in the field of foreign language learning.

**Keywords:** Cultural adaptation · German learning · Cultural conflicts · Intercultural competence

## 1 Introduction

Since all languages exist within specific cultural settings, learning a second language (L2) necessitates both linguistic and cultural proficiency. L2 learners must therefore master not just the lexicon and syntax of this language but also the related skills necessary to use these features in a culturally acceptable manner. Therefore, over the past few years, there has been an increase in the study of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and learning.

One of the main purposes of foreign language teaching is currently identified by many researchers as developing the intercultural competence of foreign language learners. While the goal of English language teaching has undergone changes from imitating “native speakers” to becoming an intercultural communicator [1], intercultural competence has also gradually attracted attention in the teaching of non-English language subjects, taking German as an example, the current “German Undergraduate Syllabus for German Majors in Colleges and Universities” takes intercultural competence as one of the teaching goals of German majors.

Important research interest in the intercultural competence field is cross-cultural adaptation. Kim defines cross-cultural adaptation as the phenomenon of individuals who,

upon entering into an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, attempt to Screate an overall ‘fit’ between the individual and the environment” to enhance the individual’s chances in their social lives by trying to build and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the environment [2]. Kim further distinguished between long-term adaptation and short-term adaptation. Kim emphasizes that the discrepancy between long-term adaptation and short-term adaptation is a reflection of the fact that the adaptive experiences differ in a variety of important ways. Long-term immigrants are more dedicated to assimilating than temporary sojourners. Accordingly, practical concerns with “easing” individual’s temporary but frequently perplexing transition into new social cultural environments have dominated studies on short-term adaptation [2].

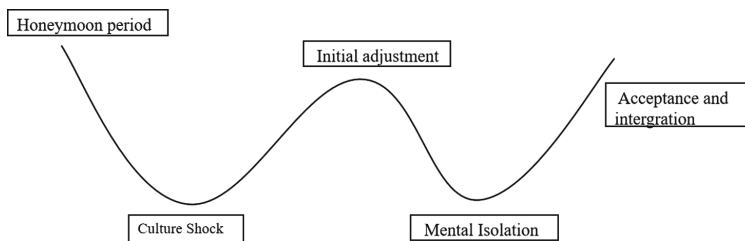
Among the studies on intercultural adaptation, U-curve and W-curve patterns are two common models adopted to address the developmental stages of cross-culture adaptation.

Levine & Adelman described the adjustment process in a “W” shaped diagram, which illustrates periods of adjustment in a second culture.

Each stage in this diagram has its typical characteristics:

- (1) **Honeymoon period.** The individual is full of aspiration and curiosity about the new culture.
- (2) **Culture shock.** The individual is faced with numerous new issues, including those related to housing, travel, shopping, and language. Constantly attempting to understand a foreign language causes mental tiredness.
- (3) **Initial adjustment.** The individuals are already skilled in coping with the problems of daily life. Even if they are not quite fluent in the target language, they can nevertheless express their essential thoughts and sentiments.
- (4) **Mental isolation.** The individuals have spent a long time in the new culture. Many still have the feeling that they cannot fully express themselves in target language as they expected. The outcome is frustration and perhaps a loss of confidence.
- (5) **Acceptance and integration.** The individuals have developed a daily routine in life, work or school. They have embraced the customs, cuisine, and personality traits of the inhabitants of the new culture. The individuals feel at ease with friends, colleagues, and target language. [3] (Fig. 1).

Previous studies illustrated the importance of cultivating intercultural competence of students in Colleges and Universities. However, with the development of globalization and the increase of multinational companies, the intercultural competence of employees



**Fig. 1.** Cultural Adjustment Process [3]

of multinational companies has become an increasing concern, it is still necessary to be a systematic study in this field. In order to study the impact of cultural adaptation on Chinese employee's German learning in multinational company, an interview study was designed to address the following research questions:

- (1) Do Chinese employees of German-owned enterprises experience cultural adaptation? If so, which steps of cultural adaptation do they go through? How do they feel at each step? If not, why?
- (2) Do Chinese employees of German-owned enterprises encounter cultural conflicts? If so, how did they deal with it? If not, why?
- (3) To what extent does cultural adaptation influence the German learning of Chinese employees in German-owned companies?

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Research Context

The study was conducted in a German company in mainland China, where some of the employees had received one-year-long German courses. The German courses were optional and usually carried out in the traditional face-to-face classrooms. The participants of the study comprised of 5 employees from a German company who had attended German courses. The proportion of employees at the German headquarters is: 80% German employees and 20% employees from other countries. The proportion of employees in the Chinese branch is: 75% Chinese employees, 20% German employees, and 5% employees from other countries. The daily working language of the Chinese branch is English, and when it comes to meetings with colleagues at the German headquarters and management level meeting, the working language is German. The five participants all come from the management level of the Chinese branch.

Specific attention was paid to ensure inclusion of participants from both genders, a range of degree levels and job positions. One of the interviewees had previous German learning experience, while the others are beginners of German language. Detailed information of the participants is shown in the following table (see Table 1):

### 2.2 Method and Procedure

An interview study was utilized to address the research questions. Since the intercultural experience the students are engaged in should be considered as a part of German learning process, it is suitable to delve more into the cross-cultural adaption process and its impact on learning German. The interviews aimed to obtain participants' views on the influence of cross-culture adaptation on their German learning. The WeChat (i.e., A Chinese social application) calling function was adopted in the interview to obtain information. A list of open-ended questions pertaining to the students' emotional experiences at various phases of cross-cultural adaptation and its impact on the German learning experience served as the basis for the interviews. Prior to interviewing the five participants, a pilot interview with one learner of the German course who is the participants' peers was conducted to confirm the format of the interview questions.

**Table 1.** Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	Age	Degree	Major	Position	Self-assessed German performance
Rachel	female	35	Bachelor	English	Assistant General Manager	B1
Matt	male	32	Bachelor	Engineering	R&D Engineer	A1
Jason	male	38	Master	MBA	Sales Manager	A2
Chery	female	29	Master	Education	Project Manager	A2
Julia	female	32	Bachelor	Economics	Purchasing Manager	A2

All interviews were conducted in mandarin, transcribed verbatim, with selected quotes translated into English for this article to ensure consistency between the English and Chinese versions. Interview data were analyzed thematically. Interviewees have been informed that the entire interview process will be recorded. All names used are pseudonyms.

### 2.3 Analysis

The interviews began with an opportunity to discuss the participants' demographic information, work roles, educational backgrounds, self-assessed German performance and their motivation for German learning. During the interview, the interviewer will explain the participants what cultural adaption is and the feelings that may be caused. Both the interviewer and participants attempted to examine whether the interviewees had experiences of cultural adaptation, how they felt during this process, and the impact of cultural adaptation on their German learning. Open-ended interview questions were used to delve into the three main research questions addressed in this study.

The participants were asked to share their experiences on the following four aspects: the motivation for learning German, cultural challenges or cultural conflicts and their way of dealing with them, cultural adaption process and their feelings, and the influence of cultural adaption on their German learning.

To get a connective sense of the data, the transcripts of the interviews were intensively read, and specific words and phrases the participants used were grouped into categories and then organized into small units based on the above-mentioned four aspects.

#### (1) Motivation for German learning

The first topic discussed during the interview was the participants' motivation for German learning, in line with previous research that found positive outcomes when motives were congruent with goals [4]. According to Rubenfeld's research, the acculturation to a new culture is facilitated by consistency between motives and goals [5]. Many of the participants indicated that learning German was for job needs and better career prospects, several participants shared this opinion:

*As it is a newly built factory, many documents are in German, and we want to be able to understand these documents as soon as possible so that the communication with Germany will be smoother. From the perspective of career development, if you consider continuing to develop in a German company in the future, being able to speak German will definitely be a plus point, which is a relatively advantageous aspect (Matt).*

*If you want to do some internal communication in this German company, from the basic level to the production department, you need to have a good knowledge of German. The company's core strategies and major meetings are conducted in German as the first language when reporting work (Jason).*

The majority of the participants learned German on the one hand out of work purposes, on the other hand they want to pursue better career development, which can cause German to be used as core Language in management level (Table 2).

## **(2) Interculture Communication Situations**

To ensure that participants have a deeper understanding of intercultural communication, they were asked to share their experiences of communicating with foreign colleagues or foreign clients in their daily work.

In multinational companies, most cross-cultural communication scenarios occur at the work level, such as work meetings, and email exchanges.

*In terms of working level, communication with German colleagues is mainly by email. In the past, when there was no epidemic, colleagues from our German headquarter would often come to the Chinese branch, but now due to the epidemic, video conferences and teleconferences are more frequent than before (Rachel).*

In addition to work level, the company often hosts employee gatherings to enhance the team atmosphere, and intercultural communication will also take place during this process:

*we also have private communication with our German colleagues. For example, our German general manager is very fond of German barbecue. He often organizes barbecue parties, and invites our suppliers, mainly Germans of course. At the parties we also communicate with the Germans in simple German (Rachel).*

## **(3) Cultural Conflicts and Strategies**

In multinational companies, because employees have different cultural backgrounds, cultural conflicts become a pervasive phenomenon. According to Lederach, conflicts are formed through perception, which is assumed to be impacted by culture. [6]. Differences in national cultures are just one factor that leads to serious conflict in the multinational company. Conflict caused by these kinds of cultural differences arise frequently on individual level, almost every interviewee had relevant experience:

*Because I am responsible for R&D, I usually need to interface with my German colleagues in many issues, but their way of working is not quite the same as ours. For example, sometimes the project is very urgent, I may prefer to communicate with them on the phone, but they prefer to put everything into writing. For example, after our phone communication, they will insist that I write another confirmation email, which I personally think is a complete waste of time (Matt).*

Cultural disparities are undoubtedly a major cause of conflict for multinational corporations. In order to avoid unnecessary losses due to culture conflicts, employees of

**Table 2.** Questions, relevant codes, and emerging sub-themes

Questions	Codes	Sub-themes
Please describe your motivation for German learning	-the company’s core documents are in German -management meetings are in German -to better communicate with colleagues in German headquarter	career development and job requirement
Have you encountered situations in which you shall communicate with foreign colleagues or foreign clients in your daily work? If so, can you share the experience with us?	-E-mails -Video Conference -Phone communication -BBQ Party -Face-to-face communication with German customers at the company’s annual meeting	cross-cultural communication scene
Have you encountered cultural challenges or cultural conflicts in the situations described in question 3? If so, how did you deal with it?	-making appropriate compromises without affecting their work progress -further communication	Strategies of handling Culture Conflict
Have you ever experienced the process of trying to adapt to German culture? If so, how did you feel at that time?	-at first feel curious, novelty, elation -even thought that German culture would be superior -later feel challenged, anxious, depressed, frustrated -gradually adapting	emotion during cultural adaptation
To what extent does each stage of German cultural adaptation influence your German learning and your willingness to German learning?	-positive learning emotions: motivated, high efficiency -negative learning emotions: anxiety, stress, frustration and low efficiency -find appropriate study method through self-adjustment and communication with teacher	cultural adaptation’s influence on German learning
	-willingness to German learning: wouldn’t be affected by negative learning emotions during cultural adaptation.	cultural adaptation’s influence on willingness to German learning

multinational companies also need to have intercultural competencies to resolve culture conflicts:

*I'm actually not too willing to get into an argument with them if the issues don't affect the progress of the project, so if they need for example conformation email, I'll cooperate. But if the project time is very tight, I will also communicate with them further to explain the situation and solve the problem (Matt).*

Matt's approach to culture conflicts also represents the majority of participants' views. When encountering culture conflicts, most participants handle them by making appropriate compromises without affecting their work progress; if the conflicts affect their work progress, they choose to communicate further with their foreign colleagues.

#### **(4) Cultural Adaptation**

There is a distinction between studies of immigrants living in a foreign culture more or less permanently and studies of the short-term adaptation of transitory sojourners among the micro-level cross-cultural adaptation studies of individuals. The employee's entry into a multinational enterprise can be regarded as a short-term cultural adaptation process, the purpose of which is to adapt to the intercultural environment of the enterprise and ensure the completion of work tasks. Levine indicated the stages in the "W" shaped diagram may not always happen in the same order and some steps may be skipped, the "symptoms" of each is common [3]. Before the interview, the participants were informed of the meaning of cultural adaptation and were invited to share their experience:

Julia expressed that she clearly went through several different stages in the cultural adaptation process. At first she was full of aspirations and novelty, cause the Germany company culture is quite different. As the work progressed, she encountered more and more problems in the cooperation with her German colleagues, and some conflicts and arguments would arise, which made her fell depressed and even resist to communicate with her German colleagues. Later through communication with other experienced colleagues and her German teacher, and a period of self-adjustment and running-in with German colleagues, she gradually reached a state of balance. Julia's experience was not an exception, most of the other participants also reflected a gradual process of cultural adaptation. However, unlike Julia, Cheryl reported a more rapid acculturation process:

*I think I went through a very short cultural adaptation process, because I studied in England before, so I have a certain understanding of British or European people. When I joined this company, I was curious about the German culture, because it differs from the British culture I was exposed to before. Later on, I was impressed by the fact that Germans speak in a more direct way, which is not the same as the British people, who spoke more euphemistically. So when I communicate with my German colleagues in a more euphemistic way, I find that they don't really understand what I wanted to convey. I felt a little disappointed at this time, because the communication was often ineffective. But I soon realized that this was because of the difference between German thinking and our Chinese thinking, and after that I took a more direct approach in my communication, including my language expressions, and the communication went much smoother (Cheryl).*

Cheryl's experience indicates that the cultural adaptation process can be simplified or accelerated by previous intercultural experiences. The cultural adaptation process of most of the participants happened gradually according to the "W" curve proposed by

Levine, and finally reached a state of equilibrium. However, some participants expressed that cultural adaptation is a cyclic process, which will cycle from the resolution of the cultural conflict to the occurrence of the next new cultural conflict. Matt's experience with handling cultural conflicts led him to feel delighted and the new emerging culture conflicts led him to feel anxious. Matt also reported that after spending about 6 months in a new culture, his satisfaction was significantly lower than it had been at arrival.

### **(5) Influence of Cultural Adaptation on German Learning**

Because the company offers German courses, it is especially important to examine whether the participants' cultural adaptation has an impact on their German learning. Some participants expressed the view that different phases of cultural adaptation influenced their feelings toward learning German:

*At the beginning, I felt that German and German culture were a new experience for me. At this time, the learning mood was also relatively high, and the learning was also effective. For example, our colleagues would correct each other's German pronunciation after class. However, as the difficulty of learning increases, including some difficulties encountered in communicating with German colleagues, it would also affect my German learning mood. I got anxious, stressed, frustrated. But as I gradually got used to the company culture, including through communication with colleagues and our German teacher, I chose to keep learning German. After this relatively stressful period, I got used to German culture, including German learning. (Jason).*

It is not surprising that the participants' German learning was also significantly influenced by cultural adaptation process. As for positive learning emotions, the participants used the words "curious", "motivated" and "novelty" to describe their feelings during the honeymoon period. In regard of negative learning emotions, the participants reported that they experienced anxiety and depression during the culture Shock period. To overcome the negative influence caused by cultural adaptation, the participants expressed that they would find an appropriate study method through self-adjustment and communicate with their German teacher.

Some participants also expressed the view that cultural adaptation influenced their feelings toward learning German and that these feelings, in turn, affected the way they adapted to the German culture.

## **3 Conclusion**

The present study has illustrated, through a qualitative investigation, the cultural adaptation stages which the Chinese employees of a German-owned company went through and the impact of cultural adaptation on Chinese employees' German learning. This study has also furthered the emotions and feelings associated with cultural adaptation. Importantly, the research results described here not only indicate how cultural adaptation stages influence German learning but it has also provided a new perspective for research on cultural adaptation in the field of foreign language learning.

A certain limitation of this research is the small sample. It is necessary for further study to examine if similar perceptions about language learning, and cultural adaptation are shared with a larger sample. Another intriguing direction for future research



would be to explore how long-term cultural adaptation relates to individuals' foreign language learning over the long term. This study used qualitative research methods, the future research could combine the quantitative method, such as using scales to measure students' anxiety levels in foreign language learning during the cultural adaptation phase.

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