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Overcoming Dual Barriers: Learning Challenges and Instructional Strategies for Central Asian Students in English-Medium Intercultural Courses

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Abstract: The pace of globalization has been accelerated under economic development, intercultural education has transitioned from a peripheral offering to an indispensable core component of modern higher education. This paper addresses a highly specific yet increasingly common pedagogical scenario: the delivery of an intercultural communication course, taught entirely in English, to a cohort of 14 Central Asian students who are non-native English speakers. The primary objective is to explain the "dual barriers" confronting this distinct learner group—a compounding and synergistic effect where linguistic challenges and cultural obstacles intertwine and mutually reinforce each other. The study commences with a detailed profiling of the students' unique socio-cultural and educational backgrounds, alongside a critical assessment of their English proficiency, which often veers towards instrumental rather than academic mastery. Subsequently, the paper provides a multi-faceted analysis of the specific learning impediments encountered across four interconnected dimensions: linguistic, cognitive, affective, and cultural. These impediments range from fundamental misunderstandings of specialized terminology and the socio-linguistic dynamics leading to classroom silence, to profound anxieties surrounding cultural identity and the constraining influence of deeply ingrained worldviews. Grounded in the principles of constructivism, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge, and humanism, which emphasizes the affective and personal growth aspects of learning, this paper proposes a comprehensive suite of targeted pedagogical interventions. These strategies encompass the deliberate use of multi-modal input to cater to diverse learning styles, the systematic implementation of scaffolded language support structures, the careful cultivation of a psychologically safe "third space" for dialogue, and the adoption of a multi-faceted assessment system. The ultimate aim of these proposals is to empower learners to effectively navigate and overcome the dual barriers, thereby facilitating not merely the superficial acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but the profound development of genuine intercultural understanding and practical, applicable competence.

Keywords: Intercultural education; Central Asian students; English-medium instruction (EMI); Learning challenges; Pedagogical strategies

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape shaped by China's Belt and Road Initiative and the overarching vision of a global community with a shared future, the scope and depth of people-to-people exchanges between China and Central Asian nations have expanded remarkably. This has precipitated a steady influx of students from Central Asian countries into Chinese academic institutions [1]. Beyond the imperative to master their chosen disciplinary fields, international students are increasingly expected to cultivate robust intercultural competencies—the skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary for effective communication and collaboration in an interconnected world [2]. It is within this context that the use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) for delivering intercultural courses has emerged as a pragmatic and prevalent pedagogical model, aiming to prepare students for global engagement.

Nevertheless, this ostensibly efficient model harbors latent complexities. For students hailing from Central Asia, the classroom transforms into a demanding arena of "dual decoding." The primary layer of challenge is linguistic: they constantly grapple with the barrier of a non-native language (English) to decipher lecture content, academic texts, and instructional nuances. The secondary, and more profound layer, is cultural: they are required to step outside their deeply embedded, often tacit, cultural frameworks to engage with, critique, and internalize an abstract body of knowledge concerning "culture" itself—a domain historically dominated by Western theoretical paradigms and perspectives [3]. These two challenges are not isolated; they interact dynamically, with language difficulties obscuring cultural concepts and cultural dissonance complicating language comprehension, which creates a unique and formidable "dual barrier" to meaningful learning [4].

This paper is grounded in reflective teaching practice and sustained observation of 14 Central Asian students enrolled in such an EMI intercultural course. Its purpose is to systematically dissect the multifaceted learning dilemmas encountered by this specific cohort. The central thesis posits that a failure to deeply comprehend and proactively address these dual barriers will fundamentally undermine the core objectives of intercultural education—namely, to foster intercultural sensitivity, adaptive communication skills, and critical cultural awareness [5]. In the worst-case scenario, the pedagogical process may inadvertently reinforce cultural stereotypes, trigger identity crises, or breed intellectual resistance. Consequently, this inquiry carries significant theoretical weight in enriching the discourse on EMI and intercultural pedagogy, while also holding immediate practical relevance for enhancing the quality and efficacy of education tailored to students from distinct regional backgrounds.

2. Background characteristics and learning starting points of Central Asian students

A profound understanding of the learners' backgrounds is not merely preparatory but foundational to diagnosing the root causes of their academic struggles and formulating effective pedagogical responses.

2.1. Cultural background: Collectivism, high power distance, and reverence for authority

Central Asian societies are characterized by a complex cultural tapestry, woven from enduring Turkic-Islamic traditions and the profound legacy of Russian-Soviet influence. This synthesis typically engenders a social ethos marked by strong collectivist orientations, high power distance, and a deeply ingrained respect for authority figures, including teachers. Within collectivist frameworks, the maintenance of group harmony and social cohesion is often prioritized over individual assertion or public self-expression [6]. This cultural predisposition directly manifests in the classroom, where students may exhibit a strong reluctance to voice personal opinions, ask probing questions, or engage in open debate, fearing that such actions might cause embarrassment, disrupt

group harmony, or challenge peers. This stands in stark contrast to the pedagogical ideals of many Western-style intercultural classrooms, which often thrive on individual viewpoint articulation and constructive conflict. Furthermore, high power distance translates into a perception of the teacher as the unequivocal epistemic authority and the primary source of knowledge. Students are socialized into a passive reception mode, expecting knowledge to be transmitted from teacher to student, rather than co-constructed through egalitarian dialogue and collaborative inquiry [7]. This learned passivity can significantly hamper their participation in a learning environment that demands critical interrogation of ideas and active knowledge construction.

2.2. Educational background: Examination-oriented traditions and knowledge transmission models

The prior educational experiences of many Central Asian students are frequently rooted in systems that are predominantly teacher-centered and heavily examination-oriented [8]. Such systems place a premium on the accurate memorization, recall, and reproduction of canonical information as defined by textbooks and authority figures [9]. Pedagogical practices often involve rote learning, dictation, and summative assessments that test factual retention. Crucially, these models offer limited scope for the development of higher-order cognitive skills such as critical analysis, synthetic thinking, creative problem-solving, or collaborative knowledge creation [10]. When these students are abruptly immersed in an intercultural classroom that explicitly demands them to question underlying assumptions, deconstruct theoretical arguments, analyze cultural artifacts critically, and construct knowledge based on their personal and cultural experiences, they encounter a significant pedagogical dissonance. They often lack the metacognitive strategies and the academic "habits of mind" required for such tasks, which leads to feelings of confusion, inadequacy, and a pervasive sense of not knowing "how to learn" in this new context.

2.3. English proficiency: Instrumental mastery versus academic deficit

While these students typically satisfy the formal English language prerequisites for admission, a critical distinction can be drawn between different types of language proficiency. Their skills are often predominantly "instrumental" or "interpersonal," adequate for navigating everyday social situations, understanding straightforward instructions, and comprehending basic disciplinary texts. However, the language demands of an interdisciplinary, theory-heavy intercultural course are of a different order altogether, requiring "cognitive academic language proficiency" (CALP) [11]. This involves grappling with a vast lexicon of abstract concepts (e.g., "cultural hybridity," "hegemony," "discourse analysis"), complex syntactic structures, nuanced academic rhetoric, and sophisticated theoretical reasoning. Their listening comprehension, while sufficient for literal understanding, may fail to capture inferential meanings, rhetorical nuances, or the conceptual depth of lectures. Similarly, their spoken production, geared towards functional communication, often lacks the precision, lexical range, and grammatical complexity required to articulate sophisticated ideas, sustain a complex argument, or engage in rapid, spontaneous academic debate. Thus, the language barrier is not merely about vocabulary but about the capacity for abstract, analytical thought expressed through the medium of English.

3. Analysis of learning challenges under the dual barriers

The interplay between the students' backgrounds and the demands of the EMI intercultural course gives rise to a complex web of challenges that permeate every aspect of the learning process.

3.1. Linguistic dimension: Loss and deviation in the decoding process

Language serves as both the vehicle for content and the tool for thinking. When this tool is inadequate, the processing of information incurs significant losses and distortions.

3.1.1. The "black box" of terminology and abstract concepts

The very foundation of intercultural studies is built upon a network of specialized and often culturally-loaded terms. Concepts like "high-context vs. low-context communication," "individualism vs. collectivism," "cultural schema," or "face-negotiation theory" are challenging even for native speakers. For Central Asian students, these terms often represent impenetrable "black boxes." They might successfully memorize a textbook definition for an exam, but the conceptual schema underlying these terms remains disconnected from their lived experiences and cultural realities. For instance, understanding "individualism" as a theoretical construct is different from intuitively grasping its manifestations in social behavior, which they may perceive not as individualism but simply as a different form of social relation. This disconnect results in learning that is superficial, fragmented, and fails to achieve deep conceptual integration.

3.1.2. "Aphasia" in classroom interaction and discussion

The pedagogical vitality of an intercultural course lies in dynamic interaction, case analysis, and the lively exchange of diverse perspectives. Yet, Central Asian students often find themselves in a state of functional "aphasia," unable to participate effectively. This phenomenon is multi-causal. Firstly, the cognitive processing load is immense: they listen to a question in English, translate and comprehend it, formulate a response in their mind, translate that response back into English, and monitor it for grammatical and social appropriateness—all while the conversation moves forward. This time lag often means the moment for contribution has passed. Secondly, there is a pervasive anxiety over linguistic accuracy. Fear of making grammatical errors, mispronouncing words, or sounding incoherent in front of peers and the teacher can be paralyzing. The perceived risk of losing face often outweighs the potential benefit of participation, leading to a conscious choice to remain silent. Thirdly, there is a lack of familiarity with the specific discourse patterns of Western academic discussion, such as using hedging language ("It could be argued that..."), providing evidential support ("Based on Hall's theory..."), or politely disagreeing ("I see your point, but I would like to offer a different perspective...").

3.1.3. "Cognitive overload" in academic reading and writing

The assigned readings in such courses, often seminal works by theorists like Hofstede, Hall, or Ting-Toomey, present a formidable challenge. The dense academic prose, elongated sentence structures, and presupposition of a shared Western cultural and philosophical background render the reading process slow, laborious, and often yielding only a superficial understanding. The challenge in academic writing is even more acute. When tasked with writing a critical reflection essay or a case study analysis, students are required to perform multiple complex operations simultaneously: demonstrate comprehension of theoretical concepts, apply them to novel situations, analyze phenomena critically, and synthesize ideas—all expressed in coherent, academic English. Often, their linguistic resources are so heavily taxed by the mechanics of writing (vocabulary, syntax) that little cognitive capacity remains for higher-order thinking [12]. Consequently, their writing tends to default to description and summary, with analysis and critical evaluation remaining underdeveloped—not necessarily due to an inability to think critically, but because the linguistic medium imposes a ceiling on their cognitive expression.

3.2. Cognitive and affective dimensions: Confusion and anxiety in the process of cognitive restructuring

Intercultural learning is inherently a destabilizing process. It requires learners to "de-center" from their own cultural worldview, to reflect upon it, and to temporarily suspend judgment—a process that inevitably provokes significant cognitive and emotional upheaval.

3.2.1. Clash of cultural frames and "classroom culture shock"

The theoretical frameworks presented in many intercultural courses, largely developed by Western scholars, often carry an implicit Western cultural bias. When the curriculum discusses the virtues of "low power distance" for organizational efficiency or frames "individualism" in predominantly positive terms as a driver of innovation, students from high power distance, collectivist cultures can experience a profound internal conflict. They may perceive the discourse as an implicit devaluation of their own cultural values, such as respect for hierarchy and the importance of community. This can trigger a defensive psychological reaction, leading them to reject the theory itself as ethnocentric or inapplicable, rather than engaging with it critically. This form of "culture shock," experienced within the confines of the classroom, is an unexpected and disorienting emotional challenge.

3.2.2. Anxiety over cultural identity and the strategy of "self-silencing"

When classroom discussions turn to topics directly related to their heritage—such as Islamic practices, nomadic traditions, or the socio-political complexities of the post-Soviet space—these students are often implicitly or explicitly positioned as "cultural representatives" or "native informants." This assigned role carries a heavy burden of representation. They may feel pressured to speak for an entire, diverse culture, worrying that their personal views will be taken as definitive, or that their explanations will be inadequate. Concurrently, they fear being misunderstood, judged, or subjected to simplistic or stereotypical interpretations by classmates and the instructor. This dual anxiety—about misrepresentation and being misunderstood—often leads to a strategic retreat into "self-silencing," a conscious withdrawal from discourse to avoid these perceived risks [13]. In doing so, the classroom loses access to invaluable, authentic perspectives, and the students miss opportunities for agentic self-expression.

3.2.3. The "cultural discomfort" of critical thinking

A cornerstone of intercultural education is the development of critical thinking, including the ability to critically examine one's own culture. However, in cultural contexts where tradition, elders, and communal norms are held in deep reverence, the act of public critique can be perceived as disrespectful, disloyal, or morally transgressive. Being asked to openly analyze and critique aspects of their own culture (e.g., gender roles, religious practices, social hierarchies) can place students in an acute state of internal ethical conflict. The academic requirement clashes with deeply held cultural and filial values, creating emotional discomfort and cognitive dissonance [14]. This internal resistance can act as a significant barrier to the internalization of critical reflection as a valuable intellectual practice.

3.3. Cultural dimension: The disconnect between theoretical frameworks and lived experience

The most profound challenge lies in the fundamental tension between the universalizing tendencies of grand theories and the particularity and complexity of the students' own cultural realities.

3.3.1. The limitations of "Western-centric" theoretical models

Established models like Hofstede's cultural dimensions, while useful heuristics, often struggle to capture the nuances and internal contradictions of Central Asian cultures. For example, categorizing the entire region simplistically as "collectivist" may overlook the strong traditions of individualism and self-reliance inherent in nomadic history. Similarly, labeling it as having "high uncertainty avoidance" might mask the remarkable adaptability and resilience developed through centuries of geopolitical upheaval. Students, drawing on their intimate cultural knowledge, are often keenly aware of these oversimplifications. This awareness can erode their trust in the theoretical tools being presented, and make them question the relevance and validity of the entire disciplinary framework.

3.3.2. The "relevance gap" in case studies and materials

Standard textbooks and teaching resources are replete with case studies focusing on high-profile cultural interfaces, such as U.S.-Japan business negotiations or German-French management styles. However, cases exploring the very interactions that are most immediate and relevant to these students—such as cross-cultural dynamics between Chinese managers and Central Asian employees in Belt and Road projects, or the adaptation challenges of Central Asian students in Chinese universities—are conspicuously absent. This "relevance gap" makes the curriculum feel abstract, distant, and disconnected from their lives, thereby dampening intrinsic motivation and the emotional investment necessary for deep learning.

3.3.3. The abstraction and essentialization of "culture"

Academic discourse, for the sake of analytical clarity, can sometimes inadvertently treat "culture" as a static, bounded, and homogeneous entity. This contradicts the lived experience of many Central Asian students, whose identities are often fluid, hybrid, and multi-layered—simultaneously encompassing ethnic, linguistic, tribal, regional, Soviet-era, and modern global influences. When they are asked to analyze their own complex, evolving identities using rigid, static theoretical categories, they experience a sense of misrepresentation and intellectual violence. The theory feels like a "Procrustean bed" that amputates the rich, messy reality of their cultural existence, leading to a sense of alienation from the subject matter.

4. Teaching strategies for overcoming the dual barriers

Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates a fundamental transformation in the instructor's role—from a knowledge transmitter to a designer of learning ecosystems, a facilitator of dialogue, and a provider of strategic support.

4.1. Reconstructing content: From universal to contextualized and localized proactive integration of regionally relevant cases

The curriculum is expected to be deliberately adapted to bridge the relevance gap. Instructors should develop and incorporate case studies that focus directly on Central Asia's intercultural interfaces, particularly with China. Potential topics include: managing cross-cultural teams in Sino-Central Asian joint ventures, analyzing communication styles in diplomatic exchanges, exploring the consumer culture adaptations of Chinese brands in Central Asian markets, or examining the social integration narratives of Central Asian students in China. This immediate relevance dramatically enhances student engagement and provides a tangible context for applying theoretical concepts.

4.2. Critical introduction and deconstruction of classical theories

Rather than presenting theories like Hofstede's as unquestioned dogma, instructors should adopt a critical pedagogy approach [15]. This involves explicitly teaching the historical context, methodological limitations, and potential cultural biases of these models. A powerful pedagogical activity is to assign students the task of "testing" a theory against their own cultural experiences. A discussion prompt could be: "Apply Hofstede's five dimensions to analyze your home country. For each dimension, discuss one aspect that seems accurate and one that seems inaccurate or oversimplified. Provide concrete examples to justify your critique." This approach validates students' cultural knowledge, transforms their skepticism into a valuable analytical exercise, and fosters a more sophisticated, critical engagement with theory.

4.3. Leveraging students as active cultural resources and co-constructors of knowledge

To alleviate the pressure of being spontaneous "cultural representatives," instructors can design structured, collaborative projects that formally position students as experts on their own cultures. For example, a semester-long group project could involve in-depth research and a multimedia presentation on a specific cultural practice (e.g., "Nauryz" celebrations, "typical communication patterns in Uzbek families," "the concept of 'kalym' and its modern interpretations"). This transforms their role from passive informants to active researchers and cultural ambassadors, and channels their identity-related knowledge into a confident, prepared academic contribution.

4.4. Optimizing teaching methods: From one-way transmission to multi-modal, interactive scaffolding

4.4.1. Implementing systematic, scaffolded language support

Systematic and scaffolded language support can be implemented through a series of targeted strategies aimed at reducing linguistic barriers and facilitating academic engagement. Pre-emptive vocabulary building is a foundational measure, which involves distributing a curated glossary of key theoretical terms and concepts before each module, complete with student-friendly definitions and contextual examples to help learners grasp core notions in advance. Complementing this, strategic multi-modal input systematically enriches textual materials with diverse media forms—such as short documentary clips, popular films, music, photographs, and infographics—to illustrate abstract concepts through multiple sensory channels, thereby diminishing the exclusive reliance on linguistic comprehension [16]. Additionally, providing discourse "sentence starters" offers explicit linguistic templates that lower the affective filter for student participation [17], covering functional phrases for agreement, disagreement, seeking clarification, and connecting theory to experience, which empowers learners to participate in academic dialogue more confidently.

4.4.2. Cultivating a psychologically safe "third space" for dialogue

Cultivating a psychologically safe "third space" for dialogue requires intentional instructional practices that prioritize inclusive and supportive interaction. One key strategy is the intentional extension of wait time: after posing a question, instructors should consciously pause for 10–15 seconds, a practice that provides non-native speakers with the crucial cognitive processing time needed to formulate responses and signals that thoughtful reflection is valued over speedy reaction [18]. Routine use of Think-Pair-Share techniques further enhances psychological safety by structuring discussion into three stages—first individual thinking, then paired discussion, and finally whole-class sharing [19]. This low-stakes, small-scale "rehearsal" in the paired stage allows students to test their ideas and language in a safe environment before potentially sharing with the larger group. Additionally, strategic permission for L1 use acknowledges that complex thinking often occurs in one's

first language; explicitly allowing students to use their native language during brainstorming sessions, note-taking, or initial pair discussions facilitates deeper cognitive engagement, as the task then shifts to translating well-formed thoughts into English rather than struggling to form complex thoughts directly in a limited L2.

4.4.3. Designing progressive, diversified, and low-anxiety assessment methods

Designing progressive, diversified, and low-anxiety assessment methods involves re-balancing assessment priorities to ensure equitable evaluation of student learning. A core measure is de-emphasizing high-stakes assessments by reducing the proportional weight of single, high-pressure final exams or lengthy term papers, which can disproportionately disadvantage students still grappling with language and academic conventions [20]. Instead, a multi-faceted assessment system should be implemented, incorporating a variety of formats that allow students to demonstrate learning in different ways. Furthermore, prioritizing formative, content-focused feedback on written and oral assignments—especially in the initial stages—helps maintain student motivation: feedback should primarily address the strength of the argument, the depth of analysis, the clarity of ideas, and the application of concepts [21]. While grammatical accuracy is important, initially prioritizing content over form encourages risk-taking and protects students' motivation to communicate their ideas effectively.

4.4.4. Transforming the teacher's role: From authority to facilitator and co-learner

Transforming the teacher's role from authority to facilitator and co-learner entails a shift in instructional mindset and practices centered on mutual learning and support. Demonstrating cultural humility and reflexivity is fundamental: instructors should openly acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge about Central Asian cultures and express a genuine, collaborative desire to learn from the students. Sharing personal anecdotes about one's own cross-cultural faux pas, learning journeys, and moments of cognitive dissonance can powerfully humanize the instructor, break down perceived power barriers, and foster a classroom atmosphere of mutual learning and vulnerability. As facilitators of intercultural dialogue, teachers' primary role in discussion is not to be the arbiter of truth but to skillfully moderate dialogue. When cultural values clash, the instructor should guide the conversation towards mutual understanding rather than resolution or judgment. This involves asking probing questions, ensuring equitable speaking opportunities, and helping students articulate the cultural logics behind their viewpoints. Additionally, establishing proactive and individualized support channels is crucial: recognizing that some challenges are deeply personal, instructors should proactively reach out to students who seem to be struggling, offering support through office hours, email check-ins, or informal conversations. This personalized attention demonstrates care for the whole student and can help identify and address specific obstacles before they become overwhelming.

5. Conclusion

Teaching an English-medium intercultural course to Central Asian students is a pedagogically complex undertaking that demands far more than content expertise. It requires a deep appreciation of the intricate "dual barriers" that students face—barriers that are not merely additive but multiplicative in their effect. This paper has argued that these challenges are systemic, rooted in the dynamic interplay of linguistic limitations, cognitive disorientation, affective anxieties, and cultural dissonances. A simplistic attribution of difficulties to "low English level" or "shyness" fundamentally misdiagnoses the problem.

Consequently, pedagogical success is contingent upon a deliberate and comprehensive "pedagogical turn."

This turn involves a shift from a one-size-fits-all transmission model to a responsive, student-centered, and scaffolded approach [22]. It demands that educators become ethnographers of their own classrooms, seeking to understand the cultural and educational footprints their students bring with them. With this empathy and understanding, instructors can then systematically reconstruct the learning experience: localizing content to enhance relevance, erecting robust linguistic and cognitive scaffolds to support skill development, and meticulously fostering a classroom climate of psychological safety—a "third space" where it is safe to experiment, to make mistakes, and to navigate the uncomfortable but necessary process of cultural decentering.

Through such a holistic and empathetic approach, Central Asian students can be empowered to gradually transcend the dual barriers. Their unique cultural backgrounds and multilingual repertoires can then be transformed from perceived deficits into rich resources for learning, both for themselves and for their peers. The ultimate goal is to guide them towards becoming confident, critical, and effective intercultural actors and mediators, capable of wielding both Chinese and English to build robust bridges of understanding and cooperation between Central Asia and the wider world. Cultivating such genuinely global, interculturally competent citizens represents the highest and most profound objective of this educational endeavor.

Disclosure statement

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