

## Language Proficiency and Communication Impact on Chinese Expatriates' Cross-Cultural Adaptation in Myanmar

Naing K.K<sup>1</sup>, Amiya Bhaumik<sup>2</sup>, Midhun Chakkaravarthy<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D in Management, Lincoln University College, Malaysia  
khinkyawnaing.01@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Lincoln University College, Malaysia  
amiya@lincoln.edu.my, midhun@lincoln.edu.my

Received: 24- June -2023

Revised: 27- July -2023

Accepted: 21- August -2023

### Abstract

Language proficiency and communication are critical aspects of expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation. Lack of host language proficiency can bring several adverse outcomes for foreign workers, such as misunderstanding and decision-making errors due to communication errors with local people. Generally, local staff are willing to use their mother language when they communicate with others, and the skills of local language proficiency become a significant barrier to positive communication. The current study examined the impact of language proficiency and communication on Chinese expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation at MNCs in Myanmar. Cross-sectional study and quantitative research methods are applied. The findings show that language proficiency and communication directly affect Chinese expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation.

**Keywords:** language proficiency, communication, cross-cultural adaptation, Chinese expatriates, Myanmar

### 1. Introduction

Bosco Nzinga and Monica Nyanway-Gimeh (2016) discovered that language is crucial in understanding culture. They found a positive relationship between language proficiency and performance, suggesting that expatriates with better language skills are more adaptable and perform better in their roles. Expatriates need to possess language knowledge when living and working in a foreign country, as it enables them to communicate effectively with locals. Lian and Lim (2020) emphasize that learning local language is necessary for expatriates to improve social interactions and adapt to a new cultural environment. Learning the host language and culture can help expatriates overcome these problems (Seimer, 2006). Host country language proficiency refers to expatriates' ability to understand, speak, and write the host country language efficiently and accurately. It is positively related to expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment, which is crucial for their success in international assignments. Higher levels of host country language proficiency motivate expatriates to learn about the host country's culture and facilitate a more substantial adaptation to the new cultural environment (Paulus & Muehlfeld, 2017).

In foreign Multinational Corporations (MNCs), host country employees inevitably use their local language as the common corporate language. Expatriates must learn and adopt the host country's language to avoid exclusion and enhance their communication skills with host country subordinates. Host country language proficiency levels for expatriates during their international assignments is important. Learning the host country's language can address language barriers with local staff, reduce reliance on local translators, improve host country knowledge, enhance cultural adaptation, and foster better relationships and trust with local employees (Zhang & Harzing, 2016). Moreover, Hung (2018) discovered that communication with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can lead to misunderstandings. Lack of understanding of cultural practices, such as non-verbal messages and behaviors, can cause communication problems and contribute to expatriates' frustration in work and daily life, reducing their motivation to adapt to a new cultural environment.

After 2015, foreign direct investment (FDI) has grown noticeably in Myanmar, and a considerable proportion of FDI is from China. With the growth and development of Chinese investment, Chinese expatriates are assigned to foreign departments. The performance of Chinese expatriates become a critical issue for Chinese multinational companies in Myanmar. To perform foreign assignments, Chinese expatriates must communicate with local subordinates, and local language proficiency and communication with local subordinates are critical. This study

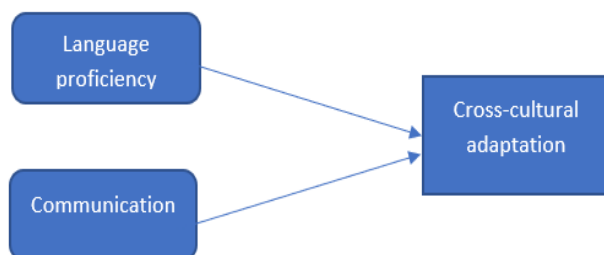
investigates the impact of local language proficiency and communication on Chinese expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation in Chinese multinational companies in Myanmar.

## 2. Literature Review

Cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic process involving the interaction between individuals and their new environment, as examined by Mandari and Boer (2021). They identified five factors that hinder the cross-cultural adaptation process: personal communication, social communication, the host environment, predisposition, and intercultural transformation. Poor adaptation to a new cultural environment can lead to failure in international assignments. According to Paulus and Muehlfeld (2017), the host country language proficiency of expatriates has a positive relationship with three domains of cross-cultural adjustment: general, interaction, and work domains. This highlights the importance of language skills in facilitating successful adaptation.

In today's business environment, employees' effective business communication, including written, oral, listening, digital, and non-verbal communication skills, can lead to better performance (Cuic Tankovic et al., 2023). Building relationships with local subordinates is crucial for the performance of expatriates in their international assignments. The willingness of expatriates to communicate is also an important criterion for employee selection. Host country nationals are more likely to support expatriates who show higher levels of intercultural adjustment and effective communication. Lapoint (2023) found that expatriates who are willing to learn the host country language tend to have positive relationships with host country nationals. To implement the best management practices in MNC subsidiaries in Myanmar, communication is a key factor. Language barriers between foreign and local managers can hinder the implementation of management practices and affect operational performance. Language training is necessary to address these communication challenges and improve team performance in MNCs (Guillouet Amit Khandelwal Rocco Macchiavello Matthieu Teachout et al., 2021).

### Conceptual framework

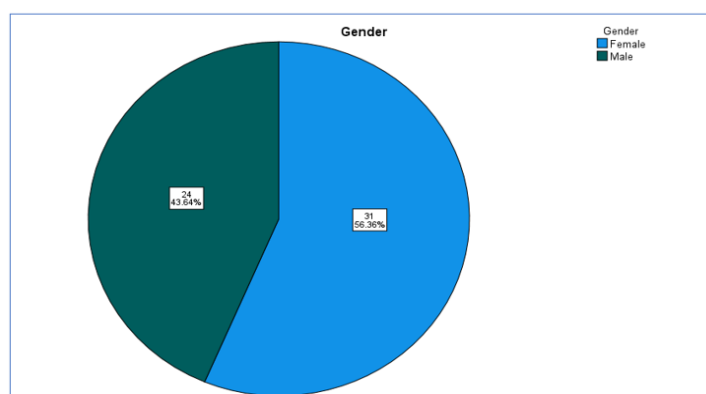


## 3. Research Methodology

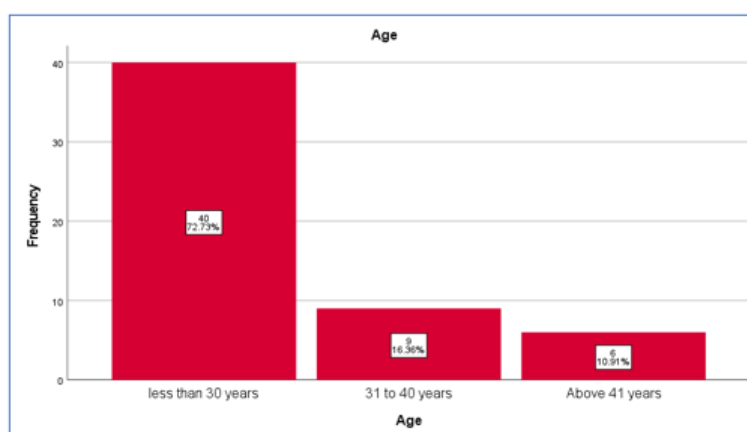
The cross-sectional study was conducted to answer this study's objective. A quantitative research method was applied, and data were collected using a survey. The targeted respondents were Chinese expatriates who work at MNCs in Myanmar. A total of 55 Chinese expatriates participated in the survey. Host language proficiency and communication were measured using five-point Likert scales questions. Two sections (social support and psychological capital) measured cross-cultural adaptation using five-point scales. Questionnaires were developed based on previous literature sources. Cronbach's alpha score measured the reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha score for language proficiency was 0.724; for communication was 0.836; and for cross-cultural adaptation was 0.803. The independent variables were language proficiency and communication. Chinese cross-cultural adaptation was the dependent variable, and socio-demographic factors (gender, age, and working experience) were the control variables. Statistical software (SPSS version 27) was used to analyze data.

## 4. Results and Discussion

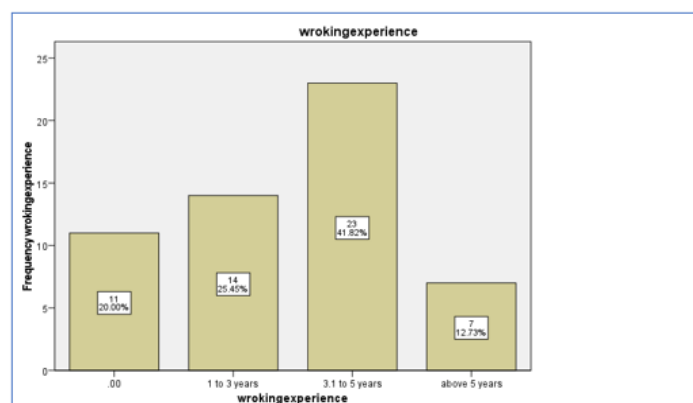
A total of 55 Chinese expatriates actively participated in study. Over half of respondents (56.36%) were female Chinese expatriates (figure 1). Figure (2) presents the age groups of respondents. The majority of participants (72.73%) aged less than 30 years at the time of employing at MNCs in Myanmar. Figure (3) shows the working experience of respondents. Nearly half of respondents (41.82%) have 3.1 to 5 years of working experience at MNCs in Myanmar.



**Figure 1: Gender of respondent (source: primary data)**



**Figure 2: Age of respondent (source: primary data)**



**Figure 3: Working experience of respondent (source: primary data)**

Descriptive statistics table shows the mean and standard deviation scores of testing items. The higher mean score shows the more perception on variable. According to results, Chinese expatriates have confidence in general language usage, confident in listening, reading and speaking host language. However, they have limited access on writing host language. For communication, Chinese expatriates have positive communication with local employees. They can change verbal behavior, use pause and silence, vary the rate of speaking, and change non-verbal behavior and facial expression when they communicate with local people. Moreover, Chinese expatriates get positive and effective social support to cope with new business and communication environment in Myanmar.

In addition, Chinese expatriates got psychological capital supports to communicate and discuss. However, they have limited to perform different tasks in MNCs (Table 1).

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
General usage of host language	3.42	.93
Writing host language	2.69	.91
Speaking host language	2.78	.90
Reading host language	3.55	.89
Listening host language	3.91	.90
Change verbal behavior	3.65	.75
Use pause and silence	3.47	.90
Vary the rate of speaking	3.96	.92
Change non-verbal behavior	3.85	.86
Alter facial expressions	3.70	.89
Clear and easy situation	3.60	.93
Tangible assistance	3.20	.91
Culture of host country	3.96	.91
Necessary information to orient to new surroundings	3.29	.92
Local institutions' official rules and regulations	4.09	.90
Expect the best when communicate with new environment	4.00	.84
Confident contributing to discussions	4.09	.90
Think of many ways to reach goals	3.30	.92
Confident analyzing an unfamiliar culture	3.54	.88
Perform effectively on many different tasks	2.76	.94

Multiple regression analysis at 95% confidence interval shows the correlation between cross-cultural adaptation and independent variables (language and communication). R square (0.556) and adjusted R square (0.549) show that 54.9% of variation in cross-cultural adaptation can be explained by variation of host language proficiency and communication. Unstandardized B coefficient value (0.666) of communication shows that when one-unit changes in communication, 0.666 unit increases in Chinese expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation. Moreover, host language proficiency has positive significant impact on cross-cultural adaptation (Unstandardized B coefficient = 0.884).

**Table (2) Multiple Regression Analysis**

Model	
R square	.566
Adjusted R square	.549
F	33.886
Constant	8.983
Unstandardized B Coefficients of communication	0.666
Unstandardized B Coefficients of Language	.884
Sig	<0.01
Dependent Variable: Cross-cultural Adaptation	
Predictors: (Constant), Language, communication	

According to Seimer (2006), proficiency in the host language and developing positive communication with the local community help foreign workers to overcome cross-cultural shock. Proficiency in the host country's

language becomes the benefit of expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation and improving performance at foreign assignments. Paulus and Muehlfeld (2017) also agreed on the positive significant impact of host language proficiency and communication on expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation. Moreover, the researchers mentioned that the poor level of host country language skills creates communication issues and misunderstandings in the workplace. Lapoint (2023) approved the critical aspect of language proficiency and communication for expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation and performance. The results of the current study showed the significant positive impact of language proficiency and communication on Chinese expatriates in Myanmar. When foreign expatriates are proficient in the local language, they can communicate effectively and reduce workplace communication errors, improving MNCs' performance.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The outcomes of this study concluded the critical roles of host language proficiency and communication for Chinese expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation. The results contribute to both practical aspects, such as multinational companies need to be aware of the role of host language skills and train the foreign expatriates to host language and culture before and when they settle at MNCs. Proficiency in the host language can help to solve communication issues. Moreover, the management teams should provide host country language training, cultural awareness, and communication processes to avoid misunderstanding when communicating with local people. The success of MNCs depends noticeably on expatriates' performance and cross-cultural adaptation. The achievement of social and psychological support is vital for cross-cultural adaptation. Moreover, host language proficiency and developing a positive communication environment are essential to overcome cultural shocks. This study limited access to other foreign expatriates assigned to MNCs in Myanmar. Thus, further studies should conduct research including other foreign workers.

## References

1. Bosco Nzitunga, J., & Monica Nyanway-Gimeh, C. (2016). Effect of Cross-Cultural Competences on Adaptive Performance among United Nations Peacebuilding Practitioners (Vol. 2, Issue 3).
2. Lian, T. K. F., & Lim, L. Y. (2020). Factors Contributing to Expatriate Adjustment to Life in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 5(9), 16–29. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v5i9.469>
3. Seimer, J. (2006). Language ability and adjustment: Western expatriates in China. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 48(3), 347–368. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.20099>
4. Zhang, L. E., & Harzing, A. W. (2016). From dilemmatic struggle to legitimized indifference: Expatriates' host country language learning and its impact on the expatriate-HCE relationship. *Journal of World Business*, 51(5), 774–786. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2016.06.001>
5. Tingting Hung (2018). Communicating Across Cultures: Dutch Expatriates in Japan A Case Study in Tokyo
6. Paulus, P., & Muehlfeld, K. (2017). Host country language skills and expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment in the presence of fear of terror. *Journal of Global Mobility*, 5(4), 418–442. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-11-2016-0062>
7. Cuic Tankovic, A., Kapeš, J., & Benazić, D. (2023). Measuring the importance of communication skills in tourism. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istrazivanja*, 36(1), 460–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1331677X.2022.2077790>
8. Lapoint, P. A. (2023). Selection of expatriate employees for international assignments: Importance of communication. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 13(2), 38–43. <https://doi.org/10.5929/2023.13.2.5>
9. Mandari, W. M., & Boer, R. F. (2021). Cross-Cultural Adaptation Process of Japanese Expatriates in Indonesia. *Jurnal ASPIKOM*, 6(2), 413. <https://doi.org/10.24329/aspikom.v6i2.908>
10. Guillouet Amit Khandelwal Rocco Macchiavello Matthieu Teachout, L., Thet Paing, A., Min Eain, L., Mo Phu, M., Aung, T., Htike Pol Antràs, Z., Angelucci, C., Atkin, D., Bandiera, O., Dessein, W., Faber, B., Gibbons, B., Manelici, I., Prat, A., Rodríguez-Clare, A., Sadun, R., Startz, M., Van Reenen, J., Vasquez, J., ... Teachout, M. (2021). *Language Barriers in Multinationals and Knowledge Transfers*. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w28807>