

The impact of L2 self-efficacy beliefs on a Chinese international student's learning approaches

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Research that has explored changes in Chinese international students' approaches to learning in Anglophone countries has tended to highlight the role of either conceptions of learning or new learning environments in shaping these changes. In contrast, little research has been done on how such changes occur within individual students. In this qualitative case study, we address this imbalance. Using data from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, we explore in-depth how a Chinese law student, negotiating academic and linguistic challenges, moved from a surface to a deep learning approach. This student's self-efficacy beliefs and mindset played a pivotal role in shaping his learning approaches in a second language environment. Pedagogical implications concerning the set-up of EAP programmes to support international students are highlighted.

Key words: Chinese international students; linguistic challenges; academic challenges; English for Academic Purposes; approaches to learning; self-efficacy beliefs; university support.

1. Introduction

With increasing numbers of Chinese international students studying at Anglophone universities, these students' approaches to learning (SAL) have been subject to intense debate. While some researchers characterise Chinese students as passive rote learners, others regard them as capable of deep learning and critical thinking (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Wang & Byram, 2011). SAL, which refer to context- and content-specific ways of fulfilling academic tasks (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004), are important since they influence the learning process and learning outcomes (Biggs et al., 2001; Vermunt & Donche, 2017).

While SAL are influenced by personal and contextual factors (Biggs et al., 2001), these factors are often ignored by researchers following the 'large culture' view (Holliday, 1999), who regard Chinese students as a cultural group with deficits or surpluses (Clark & Gieve, 2006). Consequently, the question of how individual students utilise their environmental and personal resources in the learning process has been left largely unanswered. For example, the influence on Chinese international SAL of self-efficacy beliefs, which have been defined as self-assessments of capability "to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391), seems to have been neglected. This neglect has occurred despite strong evidence showing the positive impact of self-efficacy beliefs on students' learning

behaviour and academic success (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016; Kulakow, 2020). Furthermore, in higher education (HE) studies, the relationship between linguistic competence and SAL has been under-explored. For example, while Wang and Byram (2011) recognise the influence of second language (L2) difficulties on Chinese international students' reading and understanding, they do not offer concrete recommendations; although Saravanamuthu and Yap (2014) acknowledge that linguistic challenges influence Chinese international SAL, their only recommendation is for greater fluency in English. Thus, the voluminous body of research into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) emphasising the need for academic literacy and strategies for support tends to be neglected in such HE studies. Indeed, it has been argued that the two fields of EAP and HE appear to operate largely in "parallel worlds" (Evans & Morrison, 2011, p. 199). Bridging this gap may lead to the provision of more carefully tailored university support which could help ease the transitions of Chinese international students to an L2 learning environment.

With an aim to shed light on the complexities involved in Chinese international SAL, we present a qualitative case study exploring a Chinese law student's changes in his learning approaches during his undergraduate study in the UK. After establishing our theoretical framework and outlining our methodology, we present findings on the dynamic interactions between personal, educational, cultural, and linguistic factors that contributed to fluctuations in self-efficacy beliefs and changes in learning approaches.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Factors involved in Chinese international SAL

Students are generally thought to adopt either a deep or surface approach, depending on their conceptions of learning (Vermunt & Verrmetten, 2004), although within a surface learning approach there are gradations (Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2019). Students treating learning as a process of knowledge construction are thought likely to be more effortful, efficacious and flexible in using cognitive and metacognitive strategies, suggesting a deep learning approach characterised by understanding and searching for meaning (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). In contrast, those treating learning as a process of knowledge transmission might exhibit behaviour suggesting a surface learning approach typified by facts-focused rote learning and limited reflection leading to the acquisition of fragmented knowledge (Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2019).

Research into Chinese international SAL that has emphasised the influence of cultural background has tended to divide students along these two broad lines. While researchers employing a "deficit" model have criticised these students for surface learning, those employing a "surplus" model have tended to stress positive Chinese cultural beliefs in effort that motivate Chinese students to persevere (Hau & Ho, 2008). However, both models emphasise the essential features of a cultural group rather than the experiences of individual students who interact with their environment in unique ways (Clark & Gieve, 2006).

Meanwhile, contesting cultural stereotypes, Mathias et al. (2013) found that Chinese international students only used rote learning as a survival strategy when feeling pressured by examinations. Similarly, Wang and Byram (2011) found that such students combined some Western SAL with strategies derived from Chinese cultural beliefs, such as learning through effort, reflection, repetition and memorisation, and with humility or modesty. These authors also indicate, though, that the linguistic challenges the Chinese students faced, which resulted in them reading repetitively when trying to extract meaning, may have reinforced cultural beliefs in the value of repetition leading to memorisation. Although there are arguments that Chinese students may use an "intermediate approach", which combines memorisation with understanding (Kember, 2016), Yang and Farley's (2019) large-scale comparison of Chinese, Malaysian and Australian students suggests that when the content of instruction is linguistically challenging, this could lead to the adoption of surface learning strategies in foreign language learners.

The changes that take place over time in Chinese international SAL are likely to vary between individuals. Saravanamuthu and Yap (2014) highlight that while Chinese students with high motivation to succeed can learn to adopt a deep learning approach with university support, students with low academic motivation or low language levels may retain the features of a surface learning approach despite intervention. Furthermore, these students may adopt surface learning strategies despite understanding university requirements for deep learning due to fear of failure.

Students' previous knowledge of educational systems seems to shape their conceptions of learning, which in turn affect SAL (Mathias et al., 2013). In particular, the demands of a new learning environment may encourage students to adopt a familiar approach, even one they may have doubts about, during an adjustment period (Vermunt & Donche, 2017). This demonstrates the impact of students' perceptions of their ability on SAL, as illustrated by Bandura (1993) in his self-efficacy theory, and by Dweck (2006) in her mindset theory. Surprisingly, few researchers have discussed the pivotal role of self-beliefs in Chinese international students' learning processes.

2.2. Self-efficacy beliefs and mindsets in students' learning

Self-efficacy beliefs have been found to influence students' strategy use, self-regulation, effort attribution and perseverance (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Teng, 2021). However, since these beliefs are domain- and situation-specific, they may vary across tasks and contexts, and might fluctuate (Bandura, 2013).

Students develop self-efficacy beliefs from four main sources: their actual performances, vicarious experiences from observing others, social persuasion, and physiological reactions (Schunk, 2003). Students' own performances are generally regarded as the most powerful source, with success through effort likely raising self-efficacy beliefs but failure lowering them (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Social comparison with peers can also impact these beliefs, as can social persuasion, in the form of positive or negative feedback from significant others (Bandura, 1993). Finally, students' physiological and emotional reactions can shape self-efficacy beliefs; for example, anxiety may indicate one's lack of skills or preparation.

Perseverance in challenging situations depends on the belief that ability can be improved over time (Bandura, 1993), an area elaborated on in mindset theory (Dweck, 2006), which holds that students' views about the malleability of their intelligence affect their self-efficacy beliefs, strategy use and learning outcomes. Whereas students with a growth mindset in domains such as language learning (Mercer & Ryan, 2010) believe that their intelligence and ability can be improved through effortful strategy use, those with a fixed mindset do not share this belief. Consequently, while students with a growth mindset can persevere through strategies such as help-seeking, those with a fixed mindset can lose confidence and give up quickly (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). A growth mindset may act as a buffer when self-efficacy beliefs are low (Aditomo, 2015).

These beliefs may help explain how SAL change over time, with changes in the learning environment (Vermunt & Donche, 2017) induced by trans-cultural education. To explore such change, in the under-researched context of Chinese international SAL in the UK, we employed a longitudinal in-depth qualitative individual case study (Stake, 1995) of a Chinese international student. We aimed to identify key factors that influence change, with a view to providing insights into learning processes.

3. Context

The research took place at a post-1992 UK university (i.e., a "new" university that had previously been a polytechnic), which receives approximately 1000 international Chinese students each academic year. The high numbers of Chinese international students reflect intense competition in China for places at top-tier universities and a lack of suitable local alternatives (Liu, 2013).

A UK undergraduate degree course normally takes three years, corresponding to three levels, with Years 1-3 usually described as Levels 4-6 (L4-6) in the British system. Chinese international undergraduate students typically commence their studies in China (for one–three years), before arriving in the UK. While a minority are on 1+3 programs (i.e., one year in China, followed by three years in the UK), the majority are on 2+2 or 3+1 programs. Many such students choose business-related courses, with a minority opting for science or law (Hou et al., 2014).

To qualify for admission, Chinese international students must first demonstrate English language proficiency as measured by gate-keeping tests. An overall band score of 6.0 in International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which suggests competence in reading, writing, listening and speaking, is generally required. However, students still below the English language entry requirements may receive a conditional offer upon successful completion of a pre-sessional English (PSE) course. Course lengths vary, based on the IELTS score shortfall and individual university requirements; the courses were 8–12 weeks at the university where the research was conducted.

Language-related modules at this university are generally embedded in international students' courses. General Language (GL) is a compulsory module consisting of three hours of seminars per week (in classes of 12–20 students), offered to L4–6 students as GL4–6. Cross-campus academic skills courses and school-based learning support services are also available. Each student is assigned a personal tutor to provide pastoral and academic support throughout the academic year, which is divided into two semesters. Scoring on individual modules follows a British system, with 40% representing a bare pass, and 70% first class work.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Research approach

This qualitative case study of one Chinese international student is drawn from a multi-case study of four Chinese international students which focused on exploring their academic coping and approaches to learning during their undergraduate study in the UK (Yu, 2016). Specifically, the multi-case study explored the challenges they encountered, how they coped, and why their learning behaviour changed. For this article, developed from the original doctoral research, I (the first author) have, together with the second author (my PhD supervisor), reformulated the original research questions and re-analysed data with a view to providing an in-depth exploration and enhanced understanding of one particular case.

Our case study approach is informed by a constructivist and interpretivist view of knowledge (Stake, 1995). The research design incorporated a longitudinal element to allow for exploration of changes over time through the use of qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014), classroom observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), informal talks, and online messages. Data were subjected to thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Our research questions (RQs) for this study are as follows:

RQ1. How did the student's approaches to learning change?

RQ2. To what extent does change in the student's self-efficacy beliefs explain change in his approach to learning?

RQ3. What are the implications for universities seeking to improve international student learning experience?

4.2. The participant

Zihao (pseudonym) was amongst participants selected for the original multi-case study through sampling strategies that considered Stake's (2006) recommendations. These recommendations

concern typicality, variety, uniqueness and, most importantly, the opportunities provided for learning. A key parameter informing selection was that participants were from Mainland China (so sharing a common educational background) and would continue to study for at least another year and a half (i.e., on a 1+3 or 2+2 rather than 3+1 programme). Besides sharing these typical features, Zihao, who was on a 2+2 undergraduate programme, added variety and uniqueness in various ways. For example, he was studying Law with Business, which was a more linguistically challenging course than those the others were doing. I met Zihao when observing his GL5 class in January 2013.

Observations were used to help explore “here-and-now experience in depth” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 273). Both Zihao’s seemingly careless attitude towards his GL5 module and his striking appearance attracted my attention from the start. With a pair of white-rimmed glasses over a chubby face and a short quiff hairstyle, he displayed some individuality that the Chinese post-1990 generation love to demonstrate (Song & Lee, 2012).

Most importantly, in semi-structured interviews, which allow for the flexibility to ask probing questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006), Zihao provided rich data. He trusted me and was willing to share, thus providing opportunities to achieve in-depth understanding (Stake, 1995) as I aimed to explore inner thoughts and feelings (Mills et al., 2007). Another strength was that his openness during member-checking helped enhance critical understanding of his case. For instance, when commenting on the first draft of a chapter of findings, Zihao proposed that I could better understand his present academic coping strategies by comparing them to strategies he had used in China. This level of engagement in member-checking, when the researcher receives from the research participant “a thorough reading, a mutually respectful argument, and suggestions for improvement”, is, as Stake (1995, p. 116) reflects, highly prized. Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) have discussed the process whereby dialogue with a legitimate partner is used to test knowledge claims as a way of achieving ‘communicative validity’.

4.3. Procedures for data gathering and analysis

As a non-participant, I observed Zihao eight times in two types of classes, that is, GL5 and GL6 seminars, and a discipline-related law lecture at L6. My note-taking focused on Zihao’s behaviour (Stake, 1995) to deepen my understanding of his learning situations, in particular his academic challenges in an L2 environment.

I interviewed Zihao six times over sixteen months. While my first two interviews aimed to establish rapport and obtain background information, later interview questions were more theme-driven, following a hierarchical focusing strategy (Tomlinson, 1989) to seek clarification and elicit new data to address research questions.

Feeling responsible for considering Zihao’s well-being (Wyatt, 2011), I arranged each interview at Zihao’s convenience, with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. I also used my professional knowledge at times to help him where appropriate; for example in counseling help-seeking. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that, through constructive discussions, Zihao may have developed his self-awareness of his approaches to learning.

To ensure a comprehensive coverage of and support a deep understanding of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), video recordings were used. Zihao was given the option of using either English or Chinese, and chose English for the first two interviews but Chinese for the last four. For the interviews in English, I employed denaturalised transcription, both for reader friendliness and ethical considerations, that is, to avoid any potential embarrassment during member checking (Oliver et al., 2005). I translated all interviews conducted in Chinese and back-translated them three months later to ensure accuracy.

I followed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) while collecting and analysing data simultaneously, for example by tabulating data extracts with similar patterns or potential themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and revisiting them. Data-gathering involved two distinct phases, inductive and then deductive. At the completion of the first phase, approximately one year into data collection and analysis, I had a clear sense of ‘what’ kinds of changes were taking place, but not ‘why’. Seeking to understand ‘why’ led me to mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) and self-efficacy beliefs theory (Bandura, 1986). I cross-referenced newly collected data with those collected a year earlier, until I was able to gather sufficient evidence to support interpretation.

4.4. Considerations of ethics and trustworthiness

While collecting data, I was highly conscious of the cultural issues associated with my position as a researcher. To some extent, I was a cultural insider (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006) due to having previously been educated in China and having worked there. The shared cultural values and beliefs with Zihao enabled me to establish social bonds and gain trust, which can be advantageous (Ganga & Scott, 2006; Miller & Glassner, 2016). Building rapport allowed me to enter Zihao’s world to develop my understanding of his learning situations and self-beliefs, although this may also have led to greater empathy in my interpretation of his challenges. Nevertheless, I was still conscious of the gaps in age, social class, and position in the university, which relatively made me an outsider in Zihao’s world, rendering it somewhat less likely that he would share all his stories with me. Therefore, I adopted various techniques to enhance the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) of the study. Besides member-checking (discussed above), these various forms of triangulation (Stake, 1995) included:

- Data source triangulation. I compared what he reported at different time points, thereby benefiting from prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1986);
- Methodological triangulation. I compared interview data with observations to help to minimise the possible bias of self-reports through interview (Silverman, 2000);
- Peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I achieved this through eliciting the second author’s perspectives to challenge bias and avoid tendencies to “go native” in my own data interpretations.

Peer debriefing promoted reflexivity. This is the quality of being “attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective and voice” as well as those of others (Patton, 2002, p. 65), and acting on this awareness.

4.5. Data sources and writing

The data we worked with, from Semester 1 (Time 1, T1) to Semester 4 (Time 4, T4) are as follows:

Table 1. Zihao’s data.

Sources of data	Acronym used
Six interviews	ZI.1-6
Eight classroom observations (five GL5, two GL6, one law lecture)	ZO.1-8
Four informal talks and ten instant messages	ZN.1-14
Academic transcripts	ZT

In presenting Zihao’s case, below, we aim to achieve “naturalistic generalisations” (Stake, 1995, p. 85) through thick description (Geertz, 1973). Given its strengths in supporting the interpretation of “observed social action (or behaviour) within its particular context” (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543),

thick description is vital in supporting vicarious understanding. Through thick description, we aim to help the reader to understand the development of Zihao's learning approaches in relation to his self-efficacy beliefs, mindsets and the learning environment.

5. Findings

5.1. Introduction

Cherishing his childhood dream of becoming a lawyer, Zihao sat the Chinese College Entrance Examination in 2010. However, his score was too low for entry to a top Chinese university. With his parents' help, he enrolled privately on a 2+2 'Law with Business' programme. For two years, he would study English and Law at a Chinese university before coming to the UK (ZI.1).

Transferring to the UK at Level 5 in 2012, Zihao did not feel well-prepared. The course in China had been focused on Chinese and American law, which had "little relevance to British law" (ZI.5). He had also disliked the course because the Chinese teachers "never stopped talking" and students were rarely given the opportunity to "express (their) own opinions and ideas" (ZI.1; ZI.5). They wrote by "assembling materials together" and prepared for their examinations by "memorising important points" highlighted by teachers (ZI.4-5). Zihao recalled that his only motivation at the time was to "obtain a high IELTS score to study abroad" (ZI.6).

Zihao managed to obtain a global IELTS score of 6.0, but his reading was 5.0, half a band lower than his minimum course entry requirement. Accordingly, Zihao took an 8-week PSE course at a Chinese university which focused on English language learning and provided orientation towards UK university study. Despite the PSE course, Zihao recalled that he still "could not read fast" (ZI.5; ZN.6). He was also worried about his understanding in class as failing to "follow the teachers" would prevent him from graduating (ZI.5).

Zihao's UK course consisted of language and law-related modules. He learned GL with international students (mostly Chinese), and law modules with mainly home and EU students.

5.2. Zihao's struggles

5.2.1. *Struggling to understand law in English while coasting in General Language classes*

I first interviewed Zihao at the beginning of his second semester (T2) after observing him in GL5 classes in which he appeared quite complacent, typically playing with his iPad and chatting in Chinese when he was supposed to be doing individual or group work on topics such as British weather and cooking. However, he could confidently answer questions when asked, and his English sounded much better than that of most students (ZO.1-3). Zihao explained his behaviour by saying, "there is little new to learn in class. Also, some of the lessons are a little boring. For example, how to cook a cheese omelette. We do not like English food" (ZN.1). At the same time, though, while these language lessons were easy, he was struggling with law, reporting: "Law lecturers speak very fast and use many strange words, so I am very worried" (ZI.1). This fear of failure was not unfounded. Zihao's T1 academic transcripts (ZT) showed that whereas he obtained 56-61% in language-related units, he barely passed law units at 44-45%.

In T1, Zihao had received extra support from the Law School. His year tutor had arranged a law lecturer to provide a weekly one-hour tutorial to recap lecture content and answer students' questions, after learning that the four new international law students, including three Chinese, had difficulty understanding the lectures (ZI.3; ZI.5-6). This support may have fostered a growth mindset as subsequently he believed he could improve (ZI.1). In T2, however, this support was withdrawn, and Zihao complained that he could not understand the content given the differences between British and Chinese law (ZI.2). He worried that he could not pass his law examinations. Daunted by "memorising thousands of cases", he resorted to procrastination (ZI.2). Zihao felt his self-confidence was ebbing away; his results in law modules remained at bare pass levels.

Unfortunately, with four law modules and also a final-year law project to deal with at Level 6, Zihao's self-efficacy beliefs in understanding the course content plummeted further in T3. He acknowledged that he was becoming increasingly disheartened and "less motivated" due to the higher level of difficulty of the law modules (ZI.3). He reported becoming "lost" in law lectures as he was unfamiliar with much of the specialised vocabulary, and uncomfortable because the teachers produced complicated sentences and spoke very quickly (ZI.5). Moreover, he felt "bored" and "confused" by the teaching style of a new lecturer who kept "reading the course materials without any interaction". He was also frustrated because of UK law lecturers' "divergent thinking" in delivery, which left him unable to "grasp the key ideas" despite preview (ZI.3). His hope of using lecture notes for revision became impractical as he did not know when he should take notes and was also aware of there being many words missing from his notes, which his Chinese friends could not help with either (ZI.5-6).

My observation of an Employment Law lecture in T3 provided insights into Zihao's academic challenges as an international student. The three Chinese students, including Zihao, appeared to stand out among an overwhelming majority of EU and UK students who took quick notes on their laptops while listening, and interacted with the lecturer occasionally. By contrast, Zihao and his Chinese peers listened quietly, only occasionally taking down a few words. Zihao appeared to check his handouts occasionally while listening, but his facial expressions sometimes suggested he was lost (ZO.7). Zihao later confirmed that "there was too much vocabulary" and that "sometimes the lecturer had moved on when [he] was still trying to figure out the meaning of a word" (ZN.3).

The lecturer's Socratic teaching style befitted the nature of law reading, which involves understanding concepts, filtering information, and identifying authoritative sources to support conclusions (Mertz, 2007). Zihao's self-reports suggested that he had not encountered such a pedagogical approach before in his Chinese education. Moreover, although the Employment Law lecturer repeated key messages and illustrated legal terms by using UK companies as examples, specialist vocabulary I observed the lecturer use, such as "garden leave", "statutory right", and "transparency" (ZO.7), could still have been challenging for an international student lacking contextual knowledge, further compromising comprehension. Clearly, challenges related to law learning were complicated by linguistic demands.

Meanwhile, Zihao's GL classes appeared to pose few challenges. His behaviour in these classes was observed to change (ZO.6; ZO.8), in that rather than still acting complacently (ZO.1-5), in T3 he seemed to be meticulously completing discrete academic tasks, without however communicating much in English (ZO.6; ZO.8). Zihao realised that the high scores he could obtain (compared to those of other students doing Business-related majors) could boost his degree classification, and that this might help him achieve his further goal of being admitted to a Master's programme at an elite UK university (ZI.3). Zihao appeared efficacious in studying GL6 (for which he achieved 67% – an Upper Second) as a subject, without necessarily connecting the input to his law studies.

5.2.2. Struggling with study skills while trying to interact in learning law through English

One objective of the discussions on general topics in Zihao's GL classes (ZO.1-6; ZO.8) was to develop communicative competence. Zihao did need to communicate meaningfully with his law peers, but his self-efficacy beliefs in holding discussions with home students on specialist topics seemed to be constantly low from T1 to T3. In T2, he complained that home students would "speak really fast". Not always understanding their words, he would "just sit there and say nothing", feeling "very embarrassed" and "isolated" (ZI.2). Accordingly, when home students were absent from group meetings, Zihao expressed relief that he would "not have to speak English ... or suffer from embarrassment any more" (ZI.2). Thus, social comparison with home students

weakened Zihao's self-efficacy beliefs in such language-related tasks, leading to avoidance behaviour. Instead, he would discuss academic issues solely with the few Chinese law students (ZI.1) who he felt he could communicate with easily (ZI.1-3); he was yet to realise the inadequacy of such peer support.

In T3, Zihao became more conscious of the characteristics of home students, who seemed better prepared and more willing to talk. In contrast, his Chinese peers seemed content to rely on Google answers, sat silently in class, and offered little in conversation (ZI.5). Yet, though he now wanted to, Zihao found it "very difficult" to integrate with home students due to the language barrier, saying, "if I want to communicate with them ..., then I will have to think how to express myself I have difficulty expressing myself (regarding law) in Chinese and it becomes harder in English" (ZI.3). Low self-efficacy beliefs in discussing law in the second language clearly inhibited behaviour that could have led to knowledge growth through peer learning.

Furthermore, in T3 as the demand for reading in law increased, Zihao complained about the "extremely time-consuming" reading process, during which he would often "get stuck by many new words and have to look them up" (ZI.5). With "little time for understanding", he would "look for answers online" during lesson preparation (ZI.3; ZI.5). His limitations in specialist vocabulary thus contributed to a surface learning approach.

At the same time, Zihao was clearly experiencing disquiet with his study skills, particularly after several poor performances in seminars. He recalled feeling very embarrassed one time after he answered a question confidently, only to be told by the teacher that he was answering a previous question. He also acknowledged feeling ashamed after being unable to answer questions related to China. Then, on another occasion, he felt hurt after he had spent some effort searching on the Internet for an answer, which turned out to be incomprehensible to the teacher (ZI.3; ZI.5; ZN.14). Consequently, he reported answering "easier questions with definite answers" instead of "those involving personal views" or just "lowering [his] head" "for fear of being called to answer questions" in class (ZI.5). Clearly, fear of perceived negative teacher feedback weakened his beliefs in effort-making, albeit these efforts were typified by surface learning. Such experiences also lowered his self-efficacy beliefs in law learning, leading to avoidance behaviour and a surface learning approach.

When Zihao shared these experiences, indicating that he was "in a deep valley" (feeling very low) (ZI.3), I felt conscious-bound to urge him to "take the initiative" by asking for help from his law teachers, which Zihao then agreed to try (ZI.3). My advice here can be seen in terms of 'pragmatic validity' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). As these writers argue, from a moral standpoint, the insider-researcher needs to act on their developing interpretations.

This was certainly a critical time for Zihao, who appeared conflicted in various ways. Despite his apparent use of a surface approach from T1 to T3, he seemed attracted to a deep learning approach by T3, as evidenced by developments he reported in his thinking. In T1, Zihao had relied much more fully on surface learning strategies, for example rote learning. In T2, he realised that this was impracticable (ZI.2). In T3, Zihao started to lose faith in mechanical memorisation when he realised that this did not seem to help him perform well in either class or assessments (ZI.3). He felt his "study method was not right" (ZI.3) and was trying to develop more effective strategies, although with limited success. For example, he reported attending workshops provided by the academic support service, only to find, however, that they were "aimed at a general audience" and "did not solve individual problems" (ZI.3). There were further signs suggesting his attitude was changing. By T3, Zihao was aware that if only he could overcome the communication barriers, he could benefit from discussions with home students. He also reported realising from teacher feedback in T3 that successful law study required "personal views" and "understanding" (ZI.3). In addition, he had tried, though unsuccessfully, to communicate in seminars.

5.3. Towards a deep learning approach

In T4, Zihao moved towards a deep learning approach. The catalyst was his help-seeking from his Project tutor. The draft for his final-year Project proposal was marked as a Fail (under 40%), which prompted him to “make one last try, even if the chance was slim” (ZI.5) by discussing his work with the Project tutor. During this and their subsequent meetings, his personal tutor encouraged him, through a series of Socratic dialogues, to search for detail, read for a deep understanding of cases, and draw upon his own voice in their analysis (ZI.5). This intervention was crucial since Zihao had thought in T1 and T2 that law study primarily involved memorising cases and was then bewildered in T3 when this did not work (ZI.2; ZI.5).

Understanding the essence of law reading led to an immediate improvement. Following the tutor’s suggestions and concentrating on reading for understanding (ZI.5), Zihao achieved a positive outcome, obtaining 63% (an Upper Second) for the final, revised submission of the Project proposal. He ascribed this success to better reading and more effort (ZI.5). There were subsequent benefits, too, since this positive mastery experience raised his self-efficacy beliefs and led to longer-term behavioural change. Specifically, Zihao reported in February 2014, that, since November 2013, he had pursued discussions with every subject teacher whenever necessary (ZI.4).

Zihao’s use of a deep learning approach in T4 is observable elsewhere. For example, he invested effort in recording important lectures to watch after class in order to “grasp the essential information” (ZI.5). He reported preparing for seminars through active reading; he would “look at the contents (of a book) and read only the relevant chapters ... to reduce workload”, and “summarise the vocabulary every day and remember it” (ZI.4). His more positive self-efficacy beliefs in reading led to the challenge appearing more manageable; he reported, “it’s not so difficult to read law books” (ZI.4).

Zihao’s endorsement of a deep learning approach was pronounced in his dealing with assessments. Whereas in the past in preparation for law examinations he would mechanically memorise material (ZI.1), he now “tried to understand everything while writing down the answers” (ZI.5); he justified this by saying that while “in China, you just memorise the answers, if you do this in the UK, it is insufficient because the teachers will expand a lot in class” (ZI.4). Moreover, while drafting essays, whereas previously he had “read very little”, written down his own ideas, and supported them by patching together paragraphs taken from law books, a strategy learned from his Chinese education, he now focused on “the process of analysis” and “personal understanding” in the writing process (ZI.4).

With his deeper understanding of the law modules, Zihao reported now participating in seminar discussions with home students. He respected them for their ability, in line with UK HE expectations, to study independently, supported by the teacher feedback which encouraged deep and autonomous learning (ZI.5-6). He declared, “UK teachers will just give you a rough direction; you will have to investigate and explore by yourself” (ZI.5). Learning to be autonomous was the “biggest change” Zihao had made, since in the past he had ignored teacher feedback if he had passed the assessments (ZI.3-4); he had assumed that his UK teachers would, “take the initiative” to identify his issues, just like his Chinese teachers had (ZI.6).

Zihao claimed in T4 that he had finally discovered “how to learn” the law course well because he had “learned more strategies and methods”, one example being learning “the way to understand one or two typical cases, and then applying this to similar case studies” (ZI.4). Also, he recognised that understanding came with time and effort: “If I spend more time ... and read more, I will gain a deeper understanding” (ZI.4). He had clearly regained his beliefs in effort-making, but allied this with strategies focused on gaining deep understanding.

A comparison between Zihao's L5 and L6 transcripts (ZT) shows that there was both an overall academic improvement and an improvement in the law modules taken in isolation as he progressed through the degree. While Zihao's gains, as measured by assessment marks, were only marginal, one must remember the greater level of difficulty in the law modules at L6 (ZI.3). Also, the relatively short time span between T3 and T4 rendered significant academic improvement in a year in which he was already being assessed harder to achieve, despite his transition to a deep learning approach through the year.

Still, the impact of the transition on Zihao was far-reaching. Zihao claimed that, "although I do not get high marks, as I understand what I have learned, I can explain some law cases more clearly, remember them for a long time and use them in future" (ZI.5). His deep learning approach appeared to reflect enhanced self-efficacy beliefs in learning law. After completing his undergraduate study, Zihao continued with his Master's in Law at a UK university, graduating in 2015.

6. Discussion and implications

Findings reveal transformative change in Zihao's approaches to learning while higher self-efficacy beliefs in learning law through English developed. We now summarise key changes in his approaches to learning, and then seek to explain them.

6.1. How did Zihao's approaches to learning change?

There is growing evidence which suggests that, despite their initial conceptions of learning, which are often associated with teacher-dependence and lack of critical thinking development, Chinese international students can adjust their conceptions of and approaches to learning to meet the requirements of western universities (Dai et al., 2020; Wang & Byram, 2011). Zihao's gradual shift from a surface to a deep learning approach largely reflects this development (Table 2).

Table 2. Zihao's changes in his approaches to learning.

	T1	T2	T3	T4
<i>Approach to learning</i>	Surface	Surface	Surface	Deep
<i>Beliefs about learning</i>	Achieving success through rote learning materials transmitted by teachers	Becoming aware of the impracticality of rote learning without realising the need for a change	Holding serious doubt about rote learning and considering strategy change	Rejecting rote learning and embracing learning through understanding
<i>Behaviour</i>	Learning law through rote memorisation only	Rote learning in preparation for examinations; procrastinating when encountering difficulties	Googling answers for seminar discussions; Avoiding embarrassment by answering simple questions; Writing without critical thinking	Discussing feedback with teachers; Preparing for assessments through understanding; Engaging himself in autonomous learning

However, as Table 2 illustrates, despite Zihao's overall progress, changes in his beliefs were not always reflected immediately in changes in behaviour. For example, in T3, despite questioning the value of rote learning, Zihao still retained surface learning behaviour, such as searching for simple answers online when he was aware of the need for deep reading. Linguistic issues appeared to influence this delay, as discussed previously.

As behavioural change prompted by cognitive change can take time (Borg, 2006), international students can benefit from support in a timely manner. Given the doubts and dissatisfaction he expressed with his learning strategies and performance in T3, Zihao appeared ready to change when I encouraged him to engage in help-seeking during a T3 interview. By this time, similar suggestions to seek help may also have been provided by others in the university environment.

Having highlighted key changes that appeared to occur in Zihao's journey, we now seek to explain these changes more fully. In this, our focus differs from studies (e.g., Wang & Byram, 2011) primarily interested in the change itself.

6.2. To what extent does change in Zihao's self-efficacy beliefs explain change in his approach to learning?

Although high self-efficacy beliefs are often associated with deep learning behaviour and low self-efficacy beliefs with surface learning behaviour (Geitz et al., 2016), changes in Zihao's learning approaches at various stages suggest that the relationship between SAL and self-efficacy beliefs can be more complex. Despite his growth mindset and his growing disbelief in rote learning, Zihao's low self-efficacy beliefs in learning law, due to linguistic challenges and lack of appropriate learning strategies, increased his tendency to adopt surface learning from T1 to T3.

Interestingly, his low self-efficacy beliefs also led to reflection on his strategy use in T3 and efforts to search for better strategies in T4. An explanation for this may be that "a lower sense of self-efficacy can enhance effort, self-regulation, and achievement" if students "feel that they are capable of learning" (Schunk, 1994, p. 87). Another way of putting this might be that Zihao appeared to have a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). He clearly believed he was capable of learning, as evidenced, for example, in his persistent search for better strategies for self-improvement through workshops, peer discussions, and effort-making in learning. Zihao's growth mindset appeared to be an anchor for him to gain strength from after each setback, allowing him to overcome the negative effects of low self-efficacy beliefs. This thus provides further support for the view that a growth mindset can help students who have low self-efficacy beliefs to persevere when encountering challenges (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013).

The inconsistencies between Zihao's apparent growth mindset, his self-efficacy beliefs, and his learning approaches need further explanation here. While he believed in effort from T1 onwards, his lack of effective strategies led to low self-efficacy beliefs and avoidance behaviour up until T3. This finding provides further evidence that a growth mindset needs strategy support from professionals; without such support, the persistent effort made in vain can leave students feeling incompetent (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Professional support appears especially crucial for international students transitioning to English-speaking universities. This is because ongoing SAL are affected by students' preferred approaches as well as the teaching and learning context (Biggs et al., 2001). Under the influence of his previous Chinese learning experience, where surface learning was sufficient for obtaining high academic scores, Zihao appeared to employ surface learning strategies from T1 through to T3 despite his belief in effort effecting change. In T3, although doubtful about their benefits, his use of surface learning strategies increased due to a lack of better strategies. His surface learning behaviour may have been reinforced by the linguistic challenges he faced. In this, he appears similar to the Chinese students in Saravanamuthu and Yap (2014), who adopted a surface learning strategy for fear of failure.

Nevertheless, in T4, Zihao began to embrace a deep learning approach after gaining the professional support that was encouraged. His academic improvement that accompanied this approach increased his self-efficacy beliefs in learning law, which in turn encouraged more strategies characteristic of a deep learning approach. This finding is consistent with Biggs and Tang (2011), who argue that a supportive environment, where both teaching methods and assessment are aligned with the teaching outcomes, can help achieve positive learning outcomes. Such an approach develops students' understanding so that they can not only "explain," but also "reflect," "evaluate" and "apply" what they have learned.

6.3. What are the implications for universities seeking to improve international student learning experience?

Through this case study, admittedly of one individual, we illustrate that challenges with language and conceptions of learning might significantly lower an international student's self-efficacy beliefs, which, in turn, may negatively affect SAL. However, we also demonstrate, through the lens of the 'small culture' (Holliday, 1999), that individual learners are capable of changing their SAL despite their educational backgrounds. Such changes appear to be strongly influenced by their self-efficacy beliefs which educational provision can help strengthen (Thompson et al., 2019).

Educational provision should also target linguistic issues and conceptions of learning coherently, which requires merging recommendations from the "parallel worlds" of HE and EAP (Evans & Morrison, 2011, p. 199). Thus, HE studies that highlight low attainment relating to Chinese SAL should not ignore the linguistic issues, as in Crawford and Wang (2015), or simply recommend greater fluency, as in Saravanamuthu and Yap (2014). The EAP literature can help address this imbalance through offering insights into the linguistic issues that international students may encounter in their disciplinary studies. Zihao's learning experience illustrates that studying a linguistically demanding course in English, such as law, can entail difficulties in coping with reading materials, seminar discussions and critical reading (Larcombe & Malkin, 2008), which may in turn induce a surface learning approach (Yang & Farley, 2019). Accordingly, students such as Zihao may need help with developing specialist language knowledge and skills.

Providing support with general language for such students is insufficient (Murray & Muller, 2019; Rose et al., 2020), as is evident in the contrast between Zihao's confidence in GL classes and his struggles in law. While the general language support may, to a certain extent, have helped Zihao to obtain language skills needed for daily life, these skills unfortunately appeared to fail to enable him to cope with English law. This is because, in addition to its own distinctive vocabulary, discourse and genre, "English law contains many concepts that do not appear at all elsewhere and that are therefore incomprehensible for a foreigner" (Mattila, 2013, p. 305). These concepts nevertheless need to be unraveled so that facts can be discerned and applied to the analysis of new cases (Mertz, 2007). Failing to comprehend this requirement, Zihao did not become efficacious in law learning until T4, a delay which could have been avoided with better EAP support.

EAP teachers' awareness of the requirements for international law students, and willingness to collaborate with law lecturers, are needed for law reading strategies to be incorporated into EAP classes (Allison, 2020). Through collaboration, the needed discipline-specific academic literacies can develop (Allison, 2020; Murray & Muller, 2019). Such collaboration could start from students' preparatory English programmes (Dai et al., 2020), rather than focus extensively on gate-keeping (Murray & Muller, 2019), and extend to pre-sessional and in-sessional language courses (Bai & Wang, 2020).

However, EAP provision could also learn from the focus commonly found in HE studies on conceptions of learning since such research provides insights into difficulties caused by different educational backgrounds. For example, greater awareness of Chinese students' familiarity with summative tests emphasising textbook knowledge and rote memorisation rather than formative

assessments stressing understanding and critical thinking could help faculty to initiate opportunities for students to reflect on their learning experiences (Dai et al., 2020). In Zihao's case, his initial expectations for UK teachers to provide the correct answers and identify his issues, a general practice he was familiar with in his Chinese education, contributed to his delayed help-seeking until T4. With greater understanding of Chinese students' beliefs about how to learn, professionals could shorten the transitional learning process of students such as Zihao through timely intervention.

Furthermore, to help students feel more efficacious about making change, educators could do more to initiate very practical hands-on strategy support (Thompson et al., 2019). Individualised support could usefully be made mandatory for students in the first year, when students need it the most, and could continue as the course intensity increases. As Zihao's experience shows, despite his efforts in attending academic workshops and discussing issues with his peers, his confusion about learning law persisted until his one-to-one discussions with teachers in T4. While specialist legal vocabulary can be presented during tutorials (Nguyen et al., 2015), fostering law students' skills in critical thinking and presenting personal voice during the reading into writing process appear to be crucial in promoting a deep learning approach. Such discipline-specific support can heighten students' self-efficacy beliefs in learning (Thompson et al., 2019).

7. Conclusion

To help readers gain a deep understanding of Zihao's law learning journey, and thereby arrive at "naturalistic generalisations" through "vicarious experience" (Stake, 1995, p. 85), we have presented this longitudinal case study. It includes rich details, including not only of Zihao's behaviour in different classes, but also of his perceptions about his challenges and his beliefs about his learning strategies at different times. The study illustrates that a Chinese student's previous conceptions of learning may affect their learning approaches in the UK, further suggesting that eventual adaptation to a deep learning approach might depend not only on the environment and the linguistic challenges they negotiate, but also on self-efficacy beliefs. The importance of these beliefs should not be understated. While a growth mindset with effort attribution may help, continuous failure might significantly lower an international student's academic self-efficacy beliefs in learning their subjects in an L2 learning environment. This can lead to the adoption of a surface learning approach despite an appreciation of the need for a deep learning approach. Given that other international students may be similarly affected, particularly given the certain disconnect that exists between the HE and EAP bodies of literature (Evans & Morrison, 2011), these findings might be relevant elsewhere. Universities attracting international students need to be able to provide effective strategy/skills support so that these students can maintain positive self-efficacy beliefs to achieve beneficial learning outcomes. Achieving such outcomes depends upon gaining a deep understanding of these students' needs.

However, it should be emphasised that these conclusions are based on data from a single case, albeit one that, following thematic analysis, flexibly employed inductive and deductive methods longitudinally to examine change in-depth. Therefore, since such a case study aims at "particularisation" and "uniqueness" rather than representativeness (Stake, 1995, p. 8), findings may not be applicable to other contexts. Future studies on SAL could perhaps employ alternative research methodology so that, besides particularisation, a level of representativeness may be achieved. Such research could further bridge the HE and EAP divide.

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