

The Challenge and Practice of Transformative Learning in Transactional Higher Education in China

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Date: May 03, 2025

Abstract

This study explores the application of transformative learning (TL) theory in Sino-foreign transnational higher education (TNHE) programs in China, focusing on how TL fosters cognitive and behavioral shifts among students to prepare them for global careers. Through qualitative interviews with faculty, administrators, alumni, and forum discussions, the research examines three key dimensions: the role of English proficiency in critical reflection, the impact of curriculum design and pedagogy on TL experiences, and the manifestation of cultural differences within TNHE programs. Findings identify challenges including language barriers, curriculum localization tensions, and cross-cultural communication gaps, while proposing facilitative teaching methods, localized content integration, and comprehensive faculty training. The study contributes to TL theory by contextualizing its principles within China's TNHE framework. It offers actionable recommendations for enhancing program design, intercultural pedagogy, and student readiness in a globalized workforce.

Acknowledgments

I express my deepest gratitude to my advisor and the director of the Webster Doctor of Education program, Dr. Yin Lam Lee-Johnson, for her unwavering support and guidance throughout this research journey. I am also thankful to my two readers, Dr. Sharilyn Franklin and Dr. Peter Maher, two faculty members at Webster University, for their valuable insights and encouragement. Moreover, I am very grateful to my classmate Sue Donze for always being by my side and offering valuable insights and references. Special thanks to my colleagues and participants who generously shared their experiences and perspectives in the interviews and forums, making this study possible. Lastly, I am forever grateful to my family – my cousin Dr. Yan Sun and my husband and daughter for their endless support and understanding during this challenging yet rewarding process.

Introduction

Overview of Transnational Higher Education (TNHE)

Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) refers to educational initiatives in which institutions deliver academic programs, degrees, or credentials across national borders, often without requiring students to physically relocate to the provider's home country (Tran et al., 2022). While commonly associated with international university partnerships and "exported" education models, TNHE encompasses diverse modalities, including branch campuses, online/distance learning, franchised programs, and joint degrees (Knight, 2016). Despite its growing prominence, the term remains contested, with scholars highlighting persistent terminological ambiguity and conceptual overlaps with related constructs like internationalization and offshore education (Yang, 2008). For instance, TNHE is sometimes conflated with broader internationalization strategies, yet it specifically emphasizes the cross-border delivery of curricula and credentials, often targeting localized demand for global qualifications (Huang, 2007).

The rise of TNHE reflects broader trends in globalization, driven by demands for accessible, culturally adaptable education and the commodification of higher education (Marginson, 2016). However, its implementation raises challenges, such as ensuring quality assurance across jurisdictions, addressing cultural relevance in curriculum design, and navigating regulatory disparities between host and provider countries (British Council, 2020). Scholars also critique TNHE's potential to reinforce

Global North-South inequities, as Western institutions often dominate provision, while host nations grapple with balancing educational autonomy and imported pedagogies (Mok, 2016).

Development and Delivery Models of TNHE

TNHE has become a defining feature of global academia, driven by the borderless nature of knowledge dissemination and the increasing demand for cross-border educational collaboration. Over the past three decades, TNHE has grown rapidly, shaped by both cooperative partnerships and competitive dynamics among institutions worldwide (Oleksiyenko & Yang, 2015). This expansion is propelled by universities' pursuit of internationalizing research and teaching (Doorbar & Bateman, 2008), the aspiration to integrate into the global knowledge economy, and efforts to transfer academic expertise from advanced systems to regions with developing higher education infrastructures (Smith, 2010). Such initiatives manifest in diverse forms, including curriculum internationalization, student mobility programs, and institutional alliances, all aimed at enhancing educational accessibility and quality.

China's TNHE evolution is rooted in post-reform policies aimed at modernizing its education system. The 2003 Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools institutionalized TNHE as a mechanism to reduce talent emigration ("brain drain") and cultivate globally competitive professionals (State Council, 2003). These programs blend Western pedagogical models emphasizing critical thinking and student-centered learning with China's traditional

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exam-oriented system, creating a unique cross-cultural educational landscape (Hu et al., 2019). Since its economic reforms in the late 1970s and WTO accession in 2001, China has leveraged TNHE to align its education system with global standards while advancing national political and economic agendas (Yang, 2008). By 2022, the Chinese government had approved 2,345 TNHE programs across 177 institutions, including landmark initiatives like the Hopkins-Nanjing Center (1986), signaling its commitment to educational globalization (Li et al., 2023).

The delivery of TNHE occurs through multiple modalities, each tailored to address specific needs and contexts. The distance model, for instance, leverages digital technologies to enable remote access to international education, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In China alone, over 265 million K12 students shifted to online learning during the Spring 2020 semester, with real-time video instruction and traditional media like radio and television becoming critical tools (Tencent News, 2020). This model emphasizes flexibility and scalability, allowing learners worldwide to engage with global curricula without geographical constraints. Another prominent approach is the in-country delivery model, where foreign institutions collaborate with local partners to establish campuses or joint programs within host countries. In China, such collaborations are regulated by the “two ways of one-third” policy, requiring foreign faculty to teach at least one-third of the courses and foreign partners to contribute one-third of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006; State Council, 2003). This framework ensures that students gain international credentials while remaining in their home country, fostering cultural

exchange and reducing reliance on student emigration (Levatino, 2016; Bentley et al., 2017). Complementing these models is the blended approach, which merges physical mobility programs, such as faculty exchanges, with digital platforms like joint online courses, creating a hybrid environment that balances flexibility with traditional academic engagement (Knight, 2011).

In the following two paragraphs, the author introduces the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts of TNHE development under the globalization of education.

Sociocultural Context

TNHE operates at the intersection of divergent educational philosophies. Western pedagogies, emphasizing critical thinking, open debate, and student-centered learning, often clash with China's traditional exam-oriented system, prioritizing hierarchical knowledge transmission and rote memorization (He & Liu, 2018). These differences manifest in classroom dynamics: Chinese students may perceive participatory learning as confrontational, while foreign faculty struggle to adapt to passive, instructor-led norms (Wang, 2016). Such cultural friction underscores the need for transformative learning (TL) frameworks, which encourage critical reflection to reconcile cross-cultural contradictions (Mezirow, 1991). For instance, TL's emphasis on disorienting dilemmas and provocative experiences that challenge assumptions can help students navigate tensions between collectivist values and individualist pedagogies.

Sociopolitical Context

China's TNHE initiatives are tightly regulated by policies designed to balance global standards with local relevance. The "two ways of one-third" mandate (Ministry of Education, 2006), for example, requires foreign partners to contribute at least one-third of the curriculum and faculty, ensuring quality parity while maintaining domestic oversight. However, this policy also perpetuates tensions, as Western-centric curricula often neglect China's unique socioeconomic contexts. For instance, MBA programs relying on U.S. case studies may overlook China's digital economy dynamics, limiting graduates' readiness for domestic job markets (Tran et al., 2022). Additionally, English proficiency requirements disproportionately disadvantage non-elite students, exacerbating educational inequities (Hu et al., 2019). These challenges highlight the dual role of TNHE as both a tool for global integration and a reflection of power imbalances in international education.

Significance and Research Gaps of the Study

There are three primary reasons why the researcher chose this research topic. Firstly, TL is one of the central concepts discussed and researched in the Webster Ed.D. program and holds significant importance in education. TL goes beyond knowledge acquisition; it involves a fundamental shift in perspective, enabling individuals to reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and experiences critically. This process is essential for fostering meaningful change in individuals and educational systems. As an administrator with 20 years of experience operating in TNHE

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programs, the researcher is deeply interested in better understanding and evaluating how TNHE programs can facilitate student TL experience, and explore the real value of these programs, not just in terms of academic outcomes but also in terms of personal and professional growth for students. What lasting impact do these programs have on students' worldview, critical thinking, and ability to navigate complex global challenges?

Secondly, the research aims to identify the major gaps and challenges TNHE faces in China and beyond. While TL has the potential to revolutionize education, its implementation in joint programs often faces obstacles such as cultural differences, language barriers, and varying educational philosophies. These challenges can hinder the effectiveness of such programs and limit their ability to create meaningful change. By critically examining these issues, this researcher hopes to uncover potential solutions to enhance the quality and transformation experience of TNHE programs. For instance, how can we better align curricula across institutions to promote TL? How can we support faculty and students in navigating the complexities of cross-cultural education?

Lastly, the researcher chose this topic because she noticed a significant gap in the existing literature. While many scholars have explored TL or TNHE independently, few have examined the intersection of these two areas. This gap represents an opportunity for the researcher to contribute by exploring how TL can be integrated into TNHE programs to create more impactful educational experiences. By

addressing this gap, this research can provide valuable insights and practical recommendations for stakeholders, including educators, administrators, and policymakers, who are invested in the success of TNHE initiatives. Ultimately, the research goal is to advance scholarly understanding and offer actionable strategies to improve joint programs' design and delivery model, to ensure bringing real value to students and institutions alike.

Theoretical Framing

Concept of TL Theory

TL theory, conceptualized by Jack Mezirow in the late 20th century, originated in his foundational 1978 publications and was further expanded in his seminal 1991 book, *A Critical Theory of Adult Learning* (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Rooted in adult education, the theory posits that learning transcends knowledge acquisition by fostering cognitive and emotional transformation through critical reflection and experiential engagement. Central to Mezirow's framework is the concept of "disorienting dilemmas", provocative experiences destabilizing deeply held assumptions, beliefs, or worldviews, compelling individuals to critically reevaluate their perspectives (Mezirow, 1978, 1991). This "perspective transformation" process involves rational discourse, self-reflection, and dialogue, enabling learners to reconstruct meaning and develop a broader, more inclusive understanding of themselves and society (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). By emphasizing the interplay of individual agency and social context, Mezirow's theory redefined adult learning as a

dynamic intellectual and personal growth journey.

TL Framework Integrated in TNHE Operation

The "What? So What? Now What?" model, developed by Rolfe et al. (2001), is a three-stage reflective framework widely adopted in education and professional development, which serves as a structured framework for reshaping educational practices in TNHE. This model guides students through three iterative phases of experiential inquiry to foster critical thinking and self-reflection, essential for navigating globalization's complexities. In the "What?" phase, learners begin by objectively analyzing experiences or events, cultivating observational skills and grounding their understanding in factual evidence. This initial stage emphasizes detached observation, encouraging students to identify key elements of a situation without immediate judgment. Moving to the "So What?" phase, students contextualize their observations by linking them to personal values, societal norms, or theoretical frameworks. Here, analytical and evaluative thinking deepen as learners interrogate the implications of their experiences, exploring how cultural biases, power dynamics, or institutional structures shape their interpretations. Finally, the "Now What?" phase challenges students to synthesize insights into actionable plans, bridging theory and practice through problem-solving and metacognitive awareness. This stage prioritizes agency, urging learners to design context-sensitive solutions that address real-world challenges, such as community-led sustainability initiatives or cross-cultural communication strategies (Jacoby, 2014).

Rooted in experiential learning, this cyclical process transforms passive

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experiences into opportunities for purposeful intellectual and behavioral growth (Mezirow, 1997). The model equips students to navigate the ambiguities of multicultural environments by systematically deconstructing assumptions and reconstructing perspectives. In TNHE contexts, where divergent educational philosophies and cultural norms intersect, the “What? So What? Now What?” framework fosters intercultural maturity. It empowers learners to transition from passive recipients of knowledge to proactive contributors in interconnected societies, aligning with TNHE’s mission to cultivate globally competent, ethically grounded graduates.

Based on the TL theory and critical reflection model, the researcher has created the following framework (Figure 1) to explain how TL integrates into the TNHE institutions.

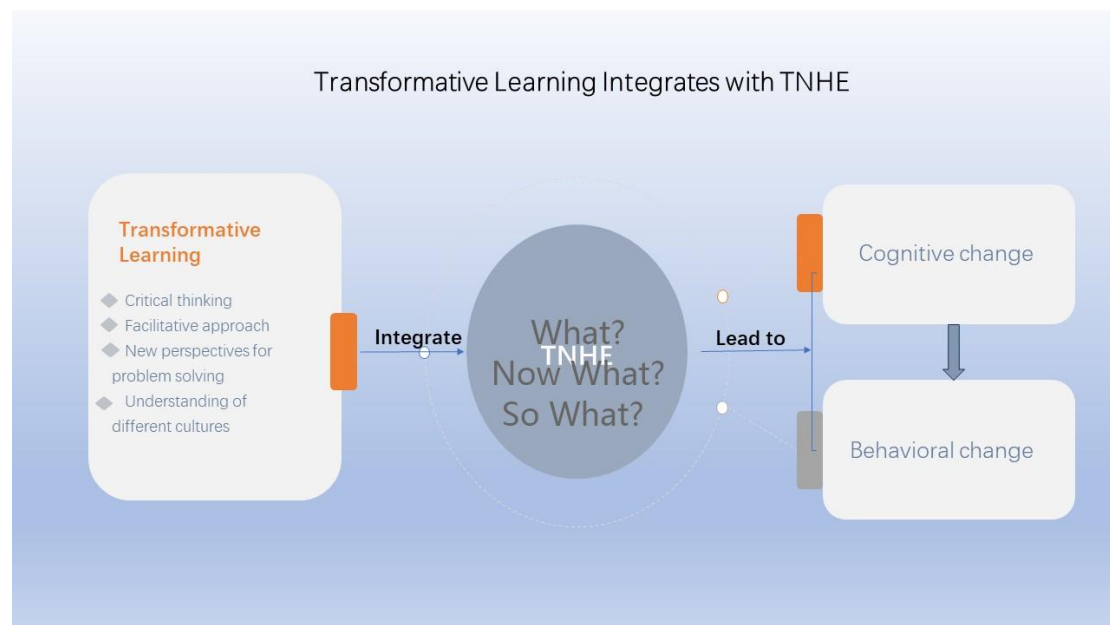


Figure 1. Framework for Transformative Learning in Transnational Higher Education

As shown in Figure 1, in the TNHE programs, instructors need to adopt a facilitative teaching approach to operationalize this framework, prioritizing student autonomy and perspective exploration. By creating environments where learners independently engage with diverse cultures and viewpoints, educators align with TL's emphasis on inclusivity and critical reflection (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). For instance, designing collaborative projects that integrate Western case studies with local Chinese contexts encourages students to reconcile global theories with regional realities. Such pedagogy not only enhances academic rigor but also fosters cultural adaptability, a cornerstone of TNHE's mission to prepare globally competent graduates.

Cultural sensitivity further underpins the successful integration of TL in TNHE. Stakeholders such as administrators, faculty, and students must recognize and address differences in classroom dynamics, communication norms, and extracurricular interactions. Adapting assessment methods to reflect multicultural expectations or incorporating hybrid learning tools that accommodate diverse learning styles can mitigate cultural friction. When these principles are embedded into TNHE operations, students experience profound cognitive shifts, moving from passive knowledge recipients to active critical thinkers capable of navigating cross-cultural challenges (Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

Beyond cognitive growth, TL drives behavioral transformation, where students apply insights to real-world contexts. For example, a student analyzing sustainable development goals (SDGs) might transition from understanding global inequalities ("What?") to critiquing systemic barriers ("So What?") and ultimately designing

community-led initiatives (“Now What?”). This progression exemplifies TL’s capacity to bridge academic knowledge with actionable solutions, fostering civic engagement and ethical leadership (Stuckey et al., 2022). Such outcomes underscore TL’s dual focus on individual growth and societal impact.

Integrating TL into TNHE creates a holistic educational paradigm that merges critical reflection, cultural adaptability, and facilitative pedagogy. By embedding the “What? So What? Now What?” model, institutions empower students to address global challenges through context-sensitive solutions while achieving personal and cognitive growth. This framework transcends traditional education models, cultivating reflective practitioners equipped to drive meaningful societal change. For TNHE programs, prioritizing TL ensures they deliver transformative value, equipping learners to thrive and actively shape a globalized world.

Fostering TL in TNHE - Strategies for Global Competence and Innovation

Learning experiences and academic achievements form the cornerstone of structured, sustainable growth in Sino-foreign cooperative education initiatives. To realize TL objectives and address inherent challenges, it is essential to establish robust communication channels and foster alignment among stakeholders - students, faculty, administrators, and partner institutions across borders. Such collaboration ensures cohesive implementation of educational philosophies and operational strategies. Concurrently, a comprehensive suite of teaching and learning methodologies is critical to standardizing educational benchmarks, enabling effective knowledge transfer, and reshaping individual cognitive and behavioral patterns. These efforts enhance

institutional interoperability and amplify the global reach of TNHE while upholding rigorous academic integrity.

Central to this transformative vision is integrating cultural competence and global awareness, equipping students to navigate diverse cultural norms, values, and communication styles. By cultivating critical thinking and problem-solving skills, learners can dissect complex challenges such as cultural dissonance, language barriers, and policy disparities, devising innovative solutions tailored to transnational contexts. Simultaneously, TL must prioritize personal and professional development, guiding students through self-reflection, identity exploration, and career preparedness to thrive in globalized job markets.

Interdisciplinary collaboration further enriches this framework. Encouraging joint projects across disciplines and cultures fosters knowledge exchange, driving innovation in addressing transnational educational challenges. Technology serves as a catalyst here: hybrid learning platforms, virtual collaborations, and data analytics tools not only enhance accessibility but also cultivate digital literacy, a vital skill in today's interconnected world.

Empirical research underpins these strategies, offering evidence-based insights to refine policies and practices. Stakeholder engagement (students, alumni, faculty, and administrators) ensures research relevance, while ongoing program evaluation and observation loops enable adaptive improvements. By harmonizing these elements, TNHE can create TL ecosystems that nurture global citizenship, deepen intercultural understanding, and inspire cross-border innovation. Ultimately, this holistic approach

positions TNHE as a dynamic force in shaping adaptable, ethically grounded leaders for a rapidly evolving world.

Literature Review

Development of TL Theory

Over the decades, TL theory has gained significant visibility and credibility within lifelong and adult education, evidenced by its pervasive influence across academic discourse. As of 2022, Mezirow's work has been referenced in 151 adult education journals (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022, p. 667), underscoring its enduring impact and evolution beyond its original conceptualization. Initially anchored in adult education, TL theory has expanded interdisciplinary reach into healthcare, social work, environmental studies, and organizational development (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Scholars have reconceptualized TL to emphasize sociocultural contexts, collaborative learning, and embodied experiences, broadening its application to address systemic and emotional dimensions of transformation. For instance, Cranton (2016) redefined educators as facilitators of dialogic, inclusive spaces, while Dirkx (2012) integrated Jungian psychology to explore the role of emotions and imagination in meaning-making processes. This expansion reflects a shift from Mezirow's early focus on individual rational reflection toward frameworks prioritizing relational, culturally situated learning (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Such developments highlight TL's adaptability in addressing complex, real-

world challenges while retaining its core emphasis on critical reflection and perspective transformation.

Critics of the TL theory

Forty-five years after Mezirow's first proposal of this theory, TL has become a well-defined scholarship and practice. Most scholars typically draw upon relevant theories to analyze how TL is understood from their perspectives. However, they hesitate to articulate a coherent alternative to the theory. Therefore, Hoggan and Finnegan (2023, p.8) advocated: "stop rehashing old critiques and instead offer or adopt more recent iterations of theory and provide productive and substantive steps forward". Many scholars started to re-examine TL theory critically, particularly its emphasis on individual cognitive processes and its limited engagement with systemic or collective dimensions of change (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023).

Sociocultural learning theories challenge the individualistic assumptions of TL theory by framing learning as a socially embedded, collective process. Building on Vygotsky's (1978) foundational work, scholars such as Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning occurs through participation in communities of practice, where knowledge is co-constructed via shared activities and cultural contexts. For instance, their concept of legitimate peripheral participation emphasizes how newcomers gradually integrate into communities through observation, imitation, and collaboration, rather than through isolated cognitive reflection (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This perspective critiques Mezirow's TL theory for overemphasizing

individual rational reflection while neglecting the relational and cultural dimensions of learning. Wenger (1998) further expands this idea by conceptualizing learning as a dynamic interplay of meaning-making, identity formation, and social belonging, asserting that transformative shifts in understanding are inseparable from collective engagement. These arguments highlight the need to reframe TL as a social practice rather than an individual cognitive event, particularly in contexts such as workplace training or community education where collaboration is central (Watkins & Marsick, 1992/2015).

Systems theory offers a complementary critique of TL's individualism by positioning learning within interconnected social, ecological, and institutional systems. Scholars like Capra and Luisi (2014) argue that systemic thinking, rooted in the interdependence of relationships and feedback loops, is essential for addressing complex challenges such as climate change or social inequality. From this perspective, individual transformation alone is insufficient; instead, learning must engage with emergent properties of systems, such as cultural norms, power hierarchies, and institutional structures (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Archer's (2003) structuration theory further bridges individual agency and systemic change by analyzing how individuals' "internal conversations" mediate their interactions with social structures. For example, collective action emerges when individuals critically reflect on systemic barriers (e.g., racism, economic inequality) and mobilize shared agency to disrupt oppressive systems (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This aligns with decolonial critiques prioritizing collective narratives and resistance over individual

growth (Smith, 2021). Systems theory thus urges educators and policymakers to design learning interventions that target systemic leverage points, such as institutional policies or cultural narratives, to enable sustainable, large-scale transformation (Chaves & Wals, 2018).

Both sociocultural and systems perspectives underscore the limitations of Mezirow's theory in addressing collective and structural dimensions of learning. While sociocultural theorists foreground the social embeddedness of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), systems theorists emphasize the interdependence of actors and structures in driving systemic change (Archer, 2003; Capra & Luisi, 2014). Together, these frameworks advocate for TL models that integrate critical individual reflection with collaborative action and structural analysis, a vision increasingly echoed in contemporary critiques of TL theory (e.g., Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023).

Scholars also address the importance of action. Stuckey et al. (2022) believe "TL generally occurs when a person encounters a perspective or experiences an event that represents a disjuncture with their existing perspective" (p. 1460). They also state that action plays a crucial role in TL, representing the behaviors that individuals apply in their newfound transformations in practical terms, transitioning from purely cognitive to behavioral changes. This suggests that without tangible action, these other elements may not be adequate to bring about significant change.

This emphasis on action and experiential grounding raises further questions about how educators should structure learning environments to foster meaningful

transformation. There is a debate about the role of the educator in TL. Some argue that the educator should be more directive and focused on guidance, whereas others advocate for a more facilitative approach that enables learners to discover and explore independently (Mezirow, 1997).

TL in International Education: From Individual Growth to Systemic Change

TL theory has evolved significantly within international education, shifting from its traditional focus on individual cognitive and emotional development toward systemic and organizational transformation. This transition responds to global challenges such as digitalization, migration, and sustainability, which demand collective adaptive capacities (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023). Contemporary TL frameworks now prioritize organizational and institutional change, advocating for environments that align with global equity, diversity, and inclusion (DEI) objectives. For instance, universities and corporations integrate TL principles to address systemic inequities in international student recruitment and workforce development, fostering policies that promote ethical leadership and intercultural communication (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023; Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

A key dimension of this shift is the adoption of global competency frameworks, emphasizing skills like collaborative problem-solving and cross-cultural adaptability, which are critical for thriving in interconnected societies (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Concurrently, technological advancements, such as AI and hybrid learning platforms, have expanded TL's scope to include digital literacy and the

ethical use of technology in global knowledge exchange (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

However, this evolution also necessitates confronting power dynamics inherent in international education, including colonial legacies and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems (Kitchenham, 2008).

Transformative assessment practices further reflect this systemic turn, measuring individual outcomes and institutional contributions to global justice and sustainability. For example, universities may evaluate curricula based on their ability to cultivate student agency in addressing climate change through cross-border partnerships (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023). Transnational education partnerships exemplify this approach, emphasizing the mobility of ideas, resources, and perspectives across borders. By embedding global viewpoints into curricula and pedagogies, TL enables institutions and learners to critically reflect on and transform entrenched assumptions, fostering "frames of reference that are more inclusive, discriminating, and open to change" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7).

The systemic reorientation of TL theory from fostering individual growth to driving institutional and cross-border change finds a critical testing ground in TNHE, an integral component and a significant manifestation of the internationalization of higher education. As TL frameworks increasingly prioritize collective adaptation to global challenges (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023), TNHE emerges as both a vehicle and a mirror for these aspirations. On one hand, TNHE operationalizes TL's goals by embedding global competencies (e.g., intercultural communication, ethical leadership)

into curricula delivered across borders. On the other hand, TNHE's own complexities, such as power imbalances in curriculum design and the commodification of education, reflect the systemic barriers TL seeks to dismantle (Marginson, 2016; Mok, 2016). Thus, examining TNHE's evolution and challenges offers a concrete lens to evaluate how TL's transformative potential translates or stumbles in the contested terrain of international education.

Statement of the Problem and Advocacy

TNHE programs in China, designed to integrate international educational practices with local contexts, aim to cultivate globally competent graduates through TL. TL emphasizes critical reflection, cultural adaptability, and behavioral change, positioning students to navigate complex global challenges. However, implementing TL in Sino-foreign cooperative programs faces systemic barriers undermining its transformative potential. This chapter delineates the core problems hindering TL's efficacy, identifies the stakeholders impacted by these challenges, and underscores the urgency of addressing them to fulfill TNHE's educational mission.

Statement of Problems in TNHE on TL Experience

English proficiency serves as a critical yet unevenly distributed resource in TNHE programs. Students with limited language skills struggle to comprehend complex academic materials, articulate nuanced ideas, or engage meaningfully in reflective practices—cornerstones of TL. Overreliance on AI tools (e.g., real-time

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translators, generative AI for assignments) risks reducing learning to superficial outputs, eroding cognitive depth, and academic integrity. This linguistic barrier disproportionately affects students from non-elite backgrounds, exacerbating inequities in access to transformative educational experiences.

Meanwhile, TNHE curricula often prioritize Western academic frameworks without adequate localization, creating disconnects between global theories and Chinese socio-cultural realities. For example, MBA programs may adopt U.S. case studies while neglecting China's unique economic dynamics, leaving students ill-prepared for local job markets. Pedagogical clashes further arise when foreign faculty emphasize open-ended debate, conflicting with Chinese students' familiarity with hierarchical, lecture-based learning. Dual-teacher models, intended to harmonize global and local perspectives, often result in redundancies or misaligned syllabi, confusing students and diluting TL outcomes.

Cultural mismatches permeate TNHE classrooms. Western instructors frequently encounter challenges adapting to collectivist learning norms, where students hesitate to critique authority or voice dissenting opinions. Conversely, Chinese students may perceive Western debate-driven pedagogies as confrontational, leading to disengagement. Assessment practices highlight these tensions: group projects designed to foster collaboration often reveal divergent perceptions of academic integrity, with some students viewing free-riding as acceptable within

collectivist frameworks. Without intentional cultural bridging, such dynamics stifle the inclusive, reflective environments that TL requires.

Advocacy of the Study

This study advocates for students as the central stakeholders, whose transformative growth is jeopardized by unresolved systemic issues. TL's promise to equip learners with critical thinking, cultural dexterity, and ethical leadership remains unfulfilled when programs prioritize enrollment metrics over pedagogical coherence. For China's TNHE initiatives to thrive as engines of global citizenship, stakeholders must confront these challenges through: 1) Localized curriculum design, to integrate Chinese case studies and hybrid pedagogies that respect local learning traditions. 2) Comprehensive Language Support: Mandatory bridging programs and AI literacy training to balance technological use with critical engagement. 3) Cross-cultural training for foreign instructors and incentives to attract high-quality, committed educators. 4) Structured dialogues and peer mentoring to bridge classroom norms and assessment practices.

The problems outlined above represent not isolated inefficiencies but systemic threats to TNHE's transformative potential. Addressing them is imperative to ensure equitable access to quality education, uphold the credibility of international partnerships, and prepare students to lead in an interconnected world. By centering student needs and fostering collaborative reforms, TNHE programs can evolve from

credential-granting ventures into genuine catalysts for cognitive and behavioral transformation.

Research Questions

The researcher proposed three research questions derived from systemic challenges and advocacy priorities outlined in China's TNHE context.

They are:

- 1) To what extent does students' English proficiency influence their learning experience and critical reflection in China's TNHE programs?
- 2) How do curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methodologies impact students' TL experience?
- 3) In what ways are cultural differences manifested and addressed within the context of TNHE programs in China?

First, English proficiency plays a critical yet uneven role in shaping learning experiences, particularly its impact on critical reflection, a cornerstone of TL, the process of questioning assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives to foster cognitive and behavioral change and personal development. motivates Question 1: *“To what extent does students' English proficiency influence their learning experience and critical reflection in China's TNHE programs?”* This question interrogates linguistic inequities and the risks of overreliance on AI tools, aiming to quantify how language barriers hinder TL's cognitive and ethical dimensions. English proficiency acts as a

gatekeeper for participation in TL-driven activities (e.g., case studies, global team projects). Students with weaker language skills struggled to articulate ideas or comprehend complex materials (e.g., difficulties in articulating ideas or understanding course materials). They may also struggle to engage in TL's reflective practices through writing, speaking, and dialogue, such as the "So What?" phase of critical reflection, which requires articulating connections between experiences and broader contexts (Mezirow, 1997).

Second, observed disconnects between Western-dominated curricula, pedagogical misalignments, and assessment tensions necessitate Question 2: "*How do curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methodologies impact students' TL experience?*" Here, the focus shifts to structural flaws in TNHE systems, probing whether localization of content (e.g., integrating Chinese case studies) or hybrid teaching models can reconcile global frameworks with local realities. This question intersects with TL's emphasis on facilitative learning and innovative problem-solving, which depend on student-centered and culturally sensitive pedagogy (e.g., case studies, simulations) and localized curriculum design. Curriculum misalignment and passive learning habits might create gaps between TL goals and student readiness.

Third, persistent cultural mismatches, manifested in classroom dynamics, authority perceptions, and divergent academic norms, underpin Question 3: "*In what ways are cultural differences manifested and addressed within the context of TNHE*

programs in China?” This question seeks to map cultural disjunctures (e.g., collectivist vs. debate-driven pedagogies) and evaluate interventions like cross-cultural training or peer mentoring in bridging these divides. These questions address the tripartite barriers (linguistic, curricular, cultural) undermining TNHE’s transformative potential, aligning with the study’s advocacy for equitable, context-sensitive reforms.

The researcher addresses the research questions during one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants representing the TNHE programs’ administrators, faculty members, alumni, and small forum discussions among the TNHE program stakeholders.

Research Design and Methodology

IRB Approval Statement

This study received full ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Webster University in 2024, following a rigorous 14-month review process. The IRB evaluated the research design, participant recruitment strategies, informed consent procedures, and data management protocols to ensure compliance with international ethical standards for human subjects research, including the principles of beneficence, justice, and respect for persons outlined in the Belmont Report. Key safeguards implemented include:

- 1) Anonymization: All interview transcripts and forum data were stripped of personally identifiable information (PII).
- 2) Informed Consent: Participants received English consent forms detailing the study's purpose, risks, and their right to withdraw at any stage.
- 3) Data Security: Video, audio, and transcripts were stored on password-protected servers, with access limited to the research team.

Revisions requested during the review process included refining interview questions to avoid cultural bias, adding more explanations on interview questions and the methods of conducting interviews and forums, as well as detailed procedures to protect the interview audio and video materials. The final approved protocol underscores the study's alignment with the World Health Organization's guidelines for ethical cross-cultural research.

This approval validates the study's commitment to ethical rigor and participant welfare throughout its implementation.

Research Sites

Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) Online Statistics

The Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) online database served as a primary source for analyzing key areas such as Sino-foreign program applications, approval lists, and related statistics. This data provided critical insights into the evolving trends and policies shaping TNHE in China. Professional translation tools

were employed to convert Chinese documents into English to ensure accuracy, particularly for technical terms. The analysis included examining the growth of TNHE programs and the impact of MOE policies, with efforts made to create visual representations of the data to enhance accessibility and engagement. Regular updates on new MOE policies affecting TNHE and international education will be shared on a dedicated Google website to keep stakeholders informed.

Webster E-library

The Webster University e-library served as a cornerstone resource for this study, providing access to scholarly journals, articles, and specialized research papers on TNHE, TL, international education, and cultural diversity. Key findings from global TNHE studies were systematically synthesized, emphasizing identifying groundbreaking research (e.g., institutional frameworks for cross-border education) and emerging trends in TL theory and practice. To construct a robust foundation for analysis, particular emphasis was placed on two critical themes: 1) TNHE's evolving role in addressing global educational inequities, and 2) the persistent challenges of cross-cultural collaboration in joint degree programs, such as divergent pedagogical expectations and assessment norms. These focal areas enabled a nuanced exploration of how TNHE intersects with cultural, linguistic, and epistemological diversity in practice.

Higher Education Associations in China

This research also drew on resources from the American University China Association (AUCA) and a few joint program websites, such as the Conference of Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools and the Research Center for Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools. These platforms provided valuable data on successful joint programs and partnerships, highlighting best practices, challenges, and outcomes. Detailed profiles of joint programs, including their structure, curriculum, and student outcomes, were created to prepare for interviews with faculty, alumni, and administrators. As a partner or member of these associations, access to exclusive data, reports, and insights on TNHE in China was secured. Key takeaways from conferences, seminars, and workshops organized by these associations were summarized and shared on the research site, with plans to invite members to contribute guest articles or participate in webinars.

Academic Resource Websites

Platforms such as Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar were integral to building research content and enhancing the study's depth, reach, and credibility. Academia.edu was utilized to access and download relevant research papers, theses, and dissertations on TNHE, MOE policies, and international education trends. ResearchGate collaborates with researchers, joins discussions, and shares insights. Groundbreaking studies and recent publications from ResearchGate were highlighted, and datasets, surveys, and research tools were shared to encourage further

collaboration. These platforms also promote the research site and solicit feedback from the academic community.

Methods for Data Collection

The researcher chooses qualitative research methods over quantitative and mixed methods for the research project. There are several reasons why the researcher believes that qualitative research better fits this research.

Qualitative research can provide a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of TL experiences, especially in TNHE. The nature of TL is an “inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative experience” (Mezirow, 1997, p.5). It is an analysis that is more subjective than objective, focusing on experience and phenomena. Those experiences need to be examined holistically, focusing on the dynamic interaction of several parts and the significance of the whole (Morrison, 2008). In addition, TNHE in China is a context-specific phenomenon, influenced by various cultural, social, and economic factors. Qualitative research methods are particularly well-suited for investigating this phenomenon because they emphasize the context that influences people’s actions or interactions and the meaning ascribed to their experiences (Yilmaz, 2013). The qualitative approach allows the researcher to delve deeply into the complexities of human experiences and their contexts.

After deciding on a qualitative method as the primary research method, the next step is to select which approach is appropriate for the current research within this framework. Five research approaches compose the qualitative research framework:

narrative studies, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study.

They have different focuses, objectives, processes, data collection methods, and conclusions. The researcher chose the case study method for the research project among the five approaches.

Table 1. Comparison of Three Qualitative Approaches

Comparison of Three Qualitative Approaches Considered in Research			
	Case Study Method	Ethnography	Phenomenology
Features	In-depth analysis of particular case or event	Observation & description of cultural practices & beliefs within a specific group	Understanding the essence of a single phenomenon experienced by all from one group
Suited research problems	In-depth understanding of case(s)	Shared pattern of culture	the essence of a lived phenomenon
Data collection method	Multiple sources of interviews, observations or document, etc.	Primary observation and interview	primary interview, document, or observation considered
Data analysis	Description of case themes or cross-case themes	Description of culture-sharing group and themes	Significant statements, description of essence
Forming Conclusion	A formal study report based on in-depth analysis and interpretation	A holistic review of a culture sharing group	A description of the essence of the phenomenon

Note. Adapted from *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

The researcher selected the case study after comparing the three dimensions from the five aspects shown in Table 1. In contrast, a case study is a detailed description and assessment of a specific situation in the real world, targeting any individual, group, organization, or partnership (Creswell & Poth, 2018), created to derive generalizations and other insights from it. The case study method is a qualitative research approach well-suited for investigating complex, real-world phenomena, such as TL of TNHE in China. The researcher explains in detail the reasons for choosing the case study approach as follows:

In-depth Analysis Feature

The case study method allows researchers to delve deeply into the complexities of a particular phenomenon and present an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of TL of TNHE, this depth of analysis enables the researcher to fully understand the nuances of how students experience and navigate this transformative process. TNHE's situation in China is complex and culturally sensitive; the case study research method enables the researcher to investigate and explore the implications behind the phenomenon. It provides a tool with depth, context-specific insights, flexibility, discovery, representation, and a holistic perspective in my research design.

Data Collection through Multiple Resources – Interviews, Forums, and Observation

Case studies typically employ a variety of data collection methods, including interviews, forums, and observation. The researcher has organized six in-depth online interviews with participants, including alumni, professors, and administrators from different Sino-foreign programs in China. The interviewees are carefully selected through a thorough consideration and multiple communications before the interview process, including Chinese and foreigners from either Chinese or foreign partners in the Sino-foreign programs, ensuring the research findings are robust and well-rounded. After each interview, the researcher read through the scripts and added her observations in writing. The researcher also shot a few self-reflection videos to provide insights into the subjective experiences and perceptions of the participants given TL. The observation through researchers' own learning experience in a Sino-

U.S. program in China and 20 years of experience in operating Sino-foreign cooperative programs has enabled her to gain a thorough understanding and comprehension, especially of issues and concerns expressed by interviewees, as well as the understanding of the unique characteristics and complexities of Sino-foreign cooperative programs.

Qualitative interviews are conducted to delve deeper into personalized perspectives from TNHE faculty and administrators related to the research questions. The interviews particularly emphasize the experiences of faculty and administrators, focusing on foreign language proficiency, teaching methods, curriculum planning, assessment, cultural bias and communications between the professors and students, foreign and local partners. Each interview is recorded with the participant's consent and subsequently transcribed. Forum discussions are focused on the common challenges in running the programs, especially about English proficiency and teaching staff recruitment and retention, seeking to uncover the relationship between English language levels and learning outcomes, as well as the victorious or failing experiences with faculty recruitment in TNHE.

By combining interviews, forums, and self-reflection methods, the researcher can achieve an in-depth understanding and insights into the contextual factors behind this phenomenon, the cultural, social, and economic backgrounds of the participants, as well as the historical and political contexts that shape the educational landscape and impact TL.

Data Analysis through Cross-case Themes

Although case studies focus on individual cases, they also involve the identification of cross-case themes and patterns. This allows the researcher to find interactions and relationships among different cases and generalize findings beyond the specific case, contributing to the broader knowledge base on TL of TNHE. By analyzing data across multiple data collection methods, the researcher can identify common challenges, successful strategies, and areas for improvement that are relevant to other similar contexts.

Conclusion Format – In-depth Interpretation and Formal Report

The case study method emphasizes the importance of in-depth interpretation and reporting of findings. It ensures that the research conclusions achieve meaningful insights into the phenomenon under study beyond the description and interpretation that phenomenology and ethnography aim to provide. This format allows the researcher to comprehensively evaluate the complex interaction among various factors mentioned above that influence the critical reflection and transformation in the learning process of Sino-foreign programs and make informed recommendations for further academic research and practice.

Limited Resources and Time Constraints

The case study approach is often more feasible within limited resources and time constraints. It focuses on a specific case or a small number of cases, making it easier to manage data collection, analysis, and reporting within a limited time and resources. This is particularly important when studying phenomena such as TL of TNHE, which may involve multiple stakeholders, complex processes, and diverse

contexts. By choosing the case study method, the researcher can ensure the findings are relevant and actionable within the available resources and time frame. The other two approaches, especially the ethnography method, require much longer time and a flexible budget.

Phenomenology and ethnography are not inherently unsuitable for research on TL, but limitations may make them less effective for this type of research. Phenomenology focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals, which can be limiting in capturing the broader social and cultural contexts that influence TL. Ethnography is a method that emphasizes the study of culture and social behavior within a natural setting. Although it can provide rich contextual data, it may not be well-suited for capturing the dynamic and often rapid changes during TL experiences. Despite their limitations, there are instances where integrating phenomenological and ethnographic methods can benefit TL research. For example, a study integrating phenomenological interviews with cognitive video can provide more comprehensive information. Ethnography can provide a deeper understanding of how individuals experience and interact with their environment during TL processes.

Qualitative research focuses on depth, context-specific insights, flexibility, discovery, representation, and validation. The case study is an appropriate and practical approach to exploring this complex and nuanced phenomenon in this particular case and contributes to constructive findings and transformation experiences.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process in this study leverages a combination of traditional and advanced AI-powered tools to ensure a comprehensive and efficient analysis of interview data. The methodology incorporates iFlytek's advanced speech recognition capabilities to transcribe audio recordings into written scripts accurately. DeepSeek's artificial intelligence capabilities are utilized for data organization and thematic analysis to perform initial content categorization and comparative analysis across different subject areas.

Before the AI-assisted analysis, all interview transcripts undergo a thorough manual review to ensure data quality and familiarity with the content. The AI-powered categorization process generates preliminary thematic classifications, a foundation for identifying core themes and developing comprehensive category structures. Following the AI's initial analysis, a meticulous manual review of both the transcripts and DeepSeek's output was carefully conducted, using Excel for final coding and categorization to ensure analytical precision.

The integrated methodology further encompasses advanced data visualization capabilities, with DeepSeek streamlining the conversion of structured Excel datasets into formats compatible with mind mapping platforms such as XMind and Amy Mind. This functionality enables the streamlined creation and iterative refinement of conceptual frameworks, thereby augmenting analytical rigor and enhancing the interpretative clarity of research outputs. Notably, while AI-driven tools significantly expedite these processes, researchers must exercise meticulous oversight to verify the

accuracy and validity of algorithmically generated outputs. Such diligence ensures alignment with scholarly standards and preserves the integrity of academic inquiry, underscoring the indispensable role of human expertise in complementing technological efficiency.

While AI tools significantly enhance the efficiency and scope of data analysis, their application in academic research requires careful consideration of ethical and methodological standards. The current landscape reveals a critical need for formal training programs and policy frameworks to guide the appropriate use of these technologies in research contexts. As AI integration becomes increasingly prevalent across academic, business, and social domains, systematic training in AI tool utilization emerges as an essential component of research preparation.

The analysis procedure incorporates peer review mechanisms to ensure methodological rigor, allowing for critical evaluation of categorization approaches and process validity. This collaborative approach facilitates continuous refinement of the analytical framework, ultimately enhancing the reliability and quality of research outcomes. The study demonstrates how AI technologies can effectively complement traditional analytical methods while maintaining rigorous academic standards through human oversight and validation processes.

Research Findings

The following paragraphs summarize the research findings and provide an

understanding of the current application of TL in TNHE programs in China. The analysis revolves around the three research questions regarding the English proficiency, curriculum adaption, pedagogy design and assessment methods, as well as the culture integration in the transformative learning in China's TNHE programs.

Language Proficiency: A Gateway to Critical Engagement and Reflection

Critical reflection is a foundational pillar of TL in China's TNHE programs, as evidenced by interviews with alumni, faculty, and administrators. Alumni consistently highlighted the benefits of English proficiency in the self-reflection process, especially in expressing nuanced ideas (e.g., abstract concepts, ethical dilemmas), engaging in debates, defending viewpoints in discussions, and writing reflective journals or essays demonstrating deep analysis. These learning outcomes reflect the shift from passive rote memorization to active analytical and evaluative skill development. Programs prioritize workshops, collaborative problem-solving activities, and global projects to cultivate these competencies, aligning with professors' emphasis on nurturing critical thinkers rather than mere information retainers.

The Challenge of English Language Barriers

The full realization of critical thinking hinges on foreign language proficiency. For instance, in Sino-UK or Sino-US joint programs, where instruction, learning materials, and assessments are exclusively delivered in English, language barriers frequently undermine academic performance and constrain transformative growth, a core objective of TL. Limited proficiency hinders comprehension of complex

disciplinary content and restricts students' ability to engage in critical reflection and cross-cultural dialogue, both essential for TL's emphasis on perspective-shifting and ethical reasoning. Interviews and forum discussions revealed that students with limited English skills may resort to superficial or formulaic responses when articulating their reflections, undermining the transformative intent of TL. Critical reflection often involves engaging with challenging texts, case studies, or theories that demand advanced reading and interpretive skills. Language barriers can limit understanding of academic content, reducing the depth of reflection and hindering participation in activities like analyzing case studies or interpreting cultural narratives. For example, students may struggle to participate in discussions, comprehend complex materials, or contribute effectively to multinational team projects. Students who struggle to decode academic English may misinterpret arguments or fail to connect theories to their own experiences, stalling transformative growth.

Language barriers can significantly affect the effectiveness of students' classroom learning, limit communication and interaction with foreign teachers, and hinder the development of diverse teaching methods, thereby greatly diminishing the quality of learning outcomes. Chinese host universities' self-appraisal reports (Hu et al., 2019) in 2017 indicated that 67 out of 122 (54.9 percent) (p. 310) of the programs involved low foreign language proficiency among students. Two main concerns were student difficulty in understanding lectures delivered by foreign teachers in foreign languages and poor performance by students in international language tests (Hu et al., 2019). During semi-structured interviews, a Chinese professor specializing in transnational

education provided an in-depth contextual analysis, elaborating on the sociohistorical factors influencing TNHE program design in China. She mentioned that Chinese students' English learning in middle and high schools does not fit the international language standard, emphasizing the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. China's national foreign language tests only emphasize reading and writing, requiring teachers to apply different pedagogies. No matter how many hours were invested, student preparation for international language tests was likely unsuccessful, given the mismatch between teaching methods and the test format. Therefore, “reforming foreign language teaching was the most desired solution expressed by the Chinese host universities (Hu et al., 2019, p. 311).”

Suggestions and Solutions to Address Language Barriers

To address the language barrier, some TNHE programs have tightened English language proficiency requirements during admissions. While this strategy aims to ensure student readiness for critical thinking activities, it risks shrinking enrollment pools and threatening financial sustainability. Institutions thus face a delicate balancing act: upholding rigorous academic standards while maintaining accessibility to attract a diverse student body.

Meanwhile, some collaborative programs have relaxed their English proficiency requirements to attract a broader pool of prospective students. However, this shift has inadvertently introduced significant challenges to the learning process. Interviews with faculty and program administrators reveal that some students have increasingly

relied on translation software during classroom activities and AI-powered tools to complete assignments in recent years. For instance, real-time translation apps are frequently used to decode lectures and course materials, while generative AI platforms assist in drafting essays, solving problems, or even participating in online discussions. While these tools provide short-term relief for students struggling with language barriers, educators note a troubling decline in critical engagement and academic rigor. Many students now submit assignments that lack originality or depth, as AI-generated content often replaces genuine analysis. Additionally, classroom interactions suffer when students depend on translations, leading to fragmented comprehension and reduced discussion participation. Administrators acknowledge that lowering language standards while boosting enrollment has compromised these programs' TL goals. One professor remarked, "We see students bypass the cognitive challenges driving growth. Language barriers are not being overcome but outsourced to technology." This trend raises concerns about long-term academic integrity and the ability of graduates to thrive in global, English-dominant professional environments.

In response to the above challenges in language proficiency, scholars suggested that foundation and language bridging programs reduce linguistic gaps and cultural differences in learning and communication styles (Holden, 2018). During the interview and forum discussions, faculty and administrators also proposed multifaceted solutions to improve students' language proficiency. They suggested prerequisite courses as foundational modules to strengthen language skills and introduce critical reflection frameworks before core coursework begins. More targeted

support on language training during the learning period, such as English workshops, one-on-one tutoring, and partnerships with language training firms, a common approach in undergraduate TNHE programs due to their extended timelines. Graduate programs may require accelerated, intensive interventions, such as language exchange initiatives and global collaborative projects. On the other hand, faculty training in cross-cultural communication can foster inclusive, dynamic classrooms.

The immediacy of AI-generated information risks diminishing deep cognitive engagement, as reliance on quick answers may erode introspection and independent analysis habits. Conversely, AI's capacity to present diverse perspectives could foster nuanced critical thinking by exposing users to conflicting viewpoints. However, this requires conscious effort to navigate algorithmic biases and avoid passive acceptance of outputs. Professors and program administrators are still exploring how to effectively integrate AI into teaching without compromising the quality of education. Using AI as a supplement to teaching, not a replacement, can maintain the human element in fostering emotional and inspirational connections in the classroom. Training faculty on effectively integrating AI tools into their teaching can enhance the learning experience. In addition, investing in technology infrastructure to support online and hybrid learning models can also ensure that AI is used to its full potential without compromising the quality of education.

Curriculum, Pedagogical Design and Assessment Methodology - the Pillars of TL

In TNHE initiatives, integrating TL principles into curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methodology serves as a strategic lever to cultivate students' cognitive and behavioral transformation. These three pillars are interdependent and collectively foster critical reflection, cultural adaptability, and innovative problem-solving in globally diverse learning environments. Below is the exploration of how TNHE programs operationalize these components to empower students as agile, globally competent learners.

Transformative Curriculum Design

Transformative curriculum design in TNHE transcends the mere transfer of foreign content, instead prioritizing a dual-axis framework that harmonizes international academic rigor with local cultural relevance. Courses may blend Western theoretical frameworks (e.g., critical pedagogy, systems thinking) with case studies rooted in Chinese socioeconomic contexts. One example given by a US professor in the interview indicated that a business management program might pair Harvard Business School case analyses with explorations of China's digital economy ecosystems, enabling students to critique global theories through localized lenses. Other options include internships, simulations, and community engagement projects that are embedded to bridge theory and practice. A sustainability curriculum could involve collaborations with multinational corporations to design eco-solutions tailored to China's urbanization challenges. Such designs align with Mezirow's (1997)

emphasis on disorienting dilemmas, where students confront cultural or conceptual contradictions, prompting critical self-reflection and perspective shifts.

TNHE institutions aim to cultivate students with a global perspective; thus, their curriculum construction, textbook selection, teaching model, and assessment approach are very different from those of domestic institutions, and their operation faces more challenges.

Curriculum Adaptation Needs More Collaboration Between Foreign and Local Institutional Partners

Often, the curricula from home institutions are implemented with minimal adaptation to local terminology and practices, failing to acknowledge cultural differences and, as a result, failing to prepare students for the local labor market (Ahmad, 2015). According to the self-appraisal reports of hosting universities, nearly one-third of TNHE programs (32%) were affected by the low quality of curriculum design and implementation (Hu et al., 2019). The report outlines three specific reasons contributing to this issue: 1) Intensive classes taught by fly-in professors provided little benefit to students, as they lacked continuity and personalized attention; 2) The overlapping of co-teaching course content taught by both foreign and Chinese professors led to confusion and redundancy; 3) Distinct cultures and values embedded in foreign courses and Chinese courses may have negatively impacted the quality of teaching (Hu et al., 2019). Tran and others (2022) also highlighted a relevant challenge in ensuring the proper management of TNHE programs in both host and

home institutions. They emphasize the need for curricula to be adapted to reflect local contexts, considering the learning styles and needs of offshore students and ensuring that academic staff from both institutions are prepared to handle the challenges of transnational education.

Interviews also revealed that curricula designed by foreign partners are not always relevant to the Chinese context, creating challenges in adapting a foreign-centric curriculum to a Chinese audience. Additionally, the global business environment requires constant updates to the curriculum, which can be challenging to implement. Faculty research can sometimes be outdated, and students expect more practical, up-to-date content.

To develop a transnational curriculum, Clarke and others (2016) suggested that developing a transnational community of practice comprising staff from home and host institutions is fundamental for synthesizing transnational knowledge, capturing contemporary learning practices, and ensuring a timely review and upgrade of the curriculum, its contents, and pedagogy. It must remain relevant and responsive to global trends and industry demands while integrating local perspectives (Haigh, 2009). Blended learning platforms (online and offline) and the development of localized textbooks and learning materials were highly desired solutions (Hu et al., 2019). This process ensures that students receive high-quality teaching materials to enable knowledge transformation, and it is also a process of integrating foreign perspectives and local realities.

Program developers shall maintain a certain degree of localization in teaching curricula and delivery methods. This requires close collaboration between home and host universities, with smooth communication and mutual understanding, to achieve academic quality and standards while adapting to local social contexts and market requirements. The interviewees' suggestions include developing more localized content relevant to the Chinese business environment while maintaining global perspectives, which can enhance the relevance of the curriculum. Regularly updating teaching materials to reflect the latest industry trends and technologies can ensure students receive up-to-date and practical knowledge. Inviting industry professionals to share their experiences and provide practical insights into the curriculum can also bridge the gap between theoretical teaching and real-world applications.

Another practice that the faculty and administrators raised in the interview is to create a dual-teacher model. To prevent the overlapping, foreign professors deliver theoretical frameworks and principles, paired with Chinese professors illustrating practical case applications. This method offers a promising strategy to localize curricula in transnational programs, and a collaborative model synergizes global academic rigor with local contextual relevance, enabling students to bridge abstract concepts with real-world scenarios rooted in the Chinese market or cultural context. Sufficient communication among foreign and Chinese local instructors enables them to reach a consensus on teaching methods and materials.

Transformation happens both ways. The collision and integration of the experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives based on different historical and cultural backgrounds result in both foreign and Chinese instructors experiencing transformation of change. However, this method poses significant challenges, particularly in coordinating syllabi, teaching methodologies, and assessment criteria between foreign and Chinese faculty. Both parties must invest substantial time and effort to align their content pacing, avoid redundancies, and ensure seamless integration of theory and practice. For instance, foreign professors may prioritize open-ended critical discussions, while Chinese counterparts might emphasize structured case analysis, a divergence requiring careful pedagogical harmonization. Additionally, redesigning courses to complement each other demands iterative communication, joint planning sessions, and flexibility to adapt to differing academic traditions. Despite these challenges, this approach enriches the learning experience, fostering transformative outcomes that balance global perspectives with localized applicability when successfully implemented.

Facilitated Pedagogy

TL-oriented pedagogy in TNHE shifts from instructor-led lectures to student-centered, facilitative methods that mirror the collaborative dynamics of global workplaces. TNHE programs in China face a unique challenge: bridging the gap between traditional lecture-based pedagogies and student-centered approaches that foster TL (Mezirow, 1997). Facilitative pedagogy, which shifts the educator's role

from knowledge transmitter to guide, has emerged as a critical strategy to cultivate independent thinking and cultural reflexivity among students accustomed to passive learning (Freire, 1970). Professors pose open-ended questions (e.g., “How might Confucian values influence leadership styles in multinational teams?”) to stimulate debate, encouraging students to articulate and defend viewpoints while respecting cultural nuances. As noted by interviewed faculty, this approach demands a redefinition of the educator’s role from “knowledge transmitter” to “facilitator of discovery.” One professor remarked, “We guide students to ask better questions, not just memorize answers.”

Faculty-led critical questioning can gradually transform students from structured prompts to open-ended debates. For instance, in a Sino-Australian business ethics course, instructors first pose comparative questions (“How does Western shareholder primacy contrast with Chinese stakeholder harmony in corporate reports?”) before advancing to abstract dilemmas (“How might Confucian ethics reshape global supply chain decisions?”) (Wang & Moore, 2022). It reduces initial anxiety and normalizes intellectual risk-taking, helping students move beyond rote memorization. As observed by a Shanghai-based TNHE lecturer, repeated low-stakes questioning encourages students to embrace ambiguity rather than seeking “correct answers.”

Meanwhile, using a digital diary or notebook where students write about how they think and learn (e.g., “Why did I struggle with this topic?” or “What strategies helped me understand this?”) to help externalize their reflection, and then getting automated suggestions from an AI tool to improve their learning process. Professors’ assessments

prioritize reflective depth over grammar (Li et al., 2022); over time, students experience a shift from declarative statements (“The textbook states...”) to self-interrogation (“I question...”), signaling cognitive growth.

Facilitative pedagogy in TNHE acts as a cultural and cognitive bridge. These strategies not only align with TL’s goals of perspective transformation but also equip Chinese students to thrive in global education without compromising localized identities, proving that pedagogical innovation, when culturally attuned, can turn systemic challenges into transformative opportunities.

Textbook Selection is a Challenge

The effective implementation of the curriculum, the adoption of facilitative teaching methodologies, and the achievement of pedagogical objectives fundamentally depend on ensuring students have timely access to up-to-date textbooks. It is a cornerstone for maintaining academic rigor, enabling learners to engage with current disciplinary debates and apply theoretical frameworks to evolving real-world contexts. Sometimes, to get a well-suited textbook in TNHE programs is a challenge. One Sino-US MBA program professor gave an example in the discussion: students expect to learn the most up-to-date knowledge and information, which requires using original editions published within the last 3-5 years. However, the availability of the latest imported textbooks is limited, making it challenging to find suitable materials. Even when a match is found, the process typically involves contacting licensed importers to purchase the books from overseas, which can be

time-consuming. As a result, it is not uncommon for courses to begin while textbooks are still in transit. According to regulations, instructors can only provide students with two textbook chapters in such cases. Purchasing e-books directly from foreign websites may offer a potential solution, but not all students adapt well to digital textbooks. Additionally, the cost of e-books is often comparable to printed versions, posing a significant financial burden for students. Practical solutions are still pending.

Transform From Final Exam Assessment to Diverse Model

Traditional assessment practices in Chinese schools are predominantly textbook-driven and examination-centric, where high-stakes summative assessments, typically end-of-semester exams, serve as the primary measure of academic achievement. Students often rely on rote memorization of lecture notes and prescribed texts to secure passing grades, a model that prioritizes content recall over critical engagement (Dai et al., 2020). In contrast, TNHE programs adopt Western-inspired process-oriented assessment methodologies emphasizing continuous evaluation, diverse task types, and individual accountability. As highlighted by interviewed faculty, TNHE assessments are distributed across the semester and incorporate multifaceted components such as class participation, presentations, reflective essays, quizzes, mid-term and final tests. This shift challenges Chinese students to reconceptualize the purpose of assessment, transitioning from a narrow focus on exam performance to valuing iterative learning and skill demonstration (Dai et al., 2020).

Western assessment frameworks prioritize formative feedback and collaborative learning, diverging sharply from China's summative, individualistic tradition. For instance, group-based assessments common in TNHE programs aim to foster teamwork and practical problem-solving. However, cultural and pedagogical disparities can lead to challenges. Some students, accustomed to independent study, may contribute minimally in group tasks, relying on peers to complete assignments, a practice viewed as academic dishonesty in Western contexts. To mitigate this, professors advocate for structured collaborative design, such as through pre-assessment briefing to clarify expectations for individual roles and accountability within group tasks; incorporating peer-reviewed contributions to assess individual input transparently; or breaking projects into phased deliverables with interim feedback to monitor progress. Such strategies align assessment practices with TNHE's transformative goals, ensuring that collaborative tasks cultivate both academic rigor and ethical responsibility. By rebalancing the emphasis from terminal exams to holistic competency development, TNHE programs bridge pedagogical divides, preparing students to thrive in global academic and professional arenas.

Recruitment and Retention of Foreign Faculty - The Foundation of Academic Excellence and Sustainable Development

Operating TNHE programs, a core concern is whether participating institutions provide an equivalent learning environment for TNHE students and whether the academic standards and learning outcomes of TNHE programs at host institutions

meet the minimum standards required by accrediting bodies. To address these issues, TNHE programs must prioritize faculty recruitment and retention strategies that ensure a sustainable supply of highly qualified teaching staff with the necessary qualifications, language proficiency, and international experience.

Faculty recruitment and retention are highlighted in the interviews and forum discussions among faculty and administrators. Qualified faculty are fundamental to ensure the academic quality, long-term stability, and transformative potential of Sino-foreign collaborative programs. Instructors serve as the primary architects of TL, operationalizing its core pillars, curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methodology into actionable educational practices. Skilled faculty members design globally informed yet locally relevant curricula, facilitate student-centered pedagogies that foster critical reflection, and implement assessments that measure cognitive and behavioral growth. Without their expertise, the theoretical framework of TL risks remaining abstract, disconnected from classroom realities.

Foreign faculty recruitment and retention are also essential for ensuring the sustainability of TNHE programs. This task faces significant challenges, including cultural adaptation barriers, shortages of qualified instructors, and inconsistent academic standards. Host institution teaching staff may experience stress due to concerns about meeting the teaching quality standards required by home institutions. At the same time, expatriates may struggle to understand local culture and cater to local needs and learning styles (Tran et al., 2022). The analysis of Chinese host

universities' self-appraisal reports also revealed that approximately one-third (32%) of TNHE programs encountered challenges related to the shortage of a sustainable supply of highly qualified teaching staff (Hu et al., 2019). One interviewee from a Sino-UK program mentioned that it is challenging to persuade full-time teaching faculty to leave their home campus and teach at the host university for a whole semester during the academic year. Consequently, TNHE programs often hire retired professors from abroad or local adjunct professors. He noted that some locally recruited teachers lacked adequate qualifications, sufficient foreign language proficiency, or international experience.

A pressing concern that TNHE program administrators raised revolves around recruiting and retaining faculty capable of effectively facilitating TL. A recurring challenge lies in sourcing foreign professors who demonstrate both pedagogical expertise in TL methodologies and cross-cultural adaptability to navigate China's unique educational ecosystem. Many international instructors struggle to reconcile Western pedagogical norms, such as open-ended debate and student-led inquiry, with Chinese classroom traditions prioritizing hierarchical knowledge transmission and exam-oriented outcomes. This dissonance often leads to high turnover rates, disrupting program continuity.

Compounding this issue is the gap between academic instruction and industry relevance. Administrators noted that some faculty members, particularly those without recent professional engagement, rely on outdated case studies or theoretical

frameworks disconnected from evolving business practices. For instance, marketing courses may emphasize traditional market segmentation models while neglecting emergent digital strategies in China's tech-driven economy. Such disconnects undermine TNHE's promise to equip students with actionable, globally competitive skills.

To enhance faculty retention, the interview faculty members stressed that it is crucial to encourage faculty to focus on teaching quality and support their professional development, including research opportunities and recognition for excellent teaching. Recruiting faculty with international experience and providing ongoing training to ensure they are up-to-date with the latest teaching methods can also enhance the quality of education. Hiring industry professionals as adjunct faculty to bring real-world experience into the classroom can bridge the gap between theoretical teaching and practical business needs.

Chinese TNHE program providers have tried different reforms to improve the foreign faculty recruitment in the past two decades. Some programs implement foreign fly-in professors who join teaching with local faculty for one course, and some rely on guest speakers, company visits, and team projects with enterprise peers to enrich the courses. These methods require significant capabilities and resources from TNHE academic support and administrative teams, as well as adequate financial support for the programs. Another option for TNHE programs is to reduce reliance on fly-in faculty and recruit more local professors with degrees from well-known foreign

universities. However, this may raise concerns about the degrees' origin and the TNHE's value.

Cultural Sensitivity and Faculty Preparedness: Cornerstones of TL in TNHE

Program administrators emphasize that TNHE initiatives intentionally immerse students in cross-cultural experiences through international residencies, collaborative projects, and peer engagements across diverse backgrounds. Such exposure, they argue, is indispensable for cultivating career-ready graduates who can navigate multinational environments where cultural sensitivity is a critical competency. Exposure to multiple cultural frameworks equips students to recognize that problems are rarely universal, shaped by social, historical, and institutional contexts. For example, students learn to tailor solutions to cultural priorities by understanding how collectivist values in China influenced lockdown policies versus individualist resistance in some Western nations. This cultural dexterity prevents “one-size-fits-all” thinking and encourages context-sensitive innovation.

However, the success of these initiatives hinges equally on faculty preparedness to model and foster intercultural understanding. As revealed in interviews, foreign instructors need to undergo rigorous pre-arrival cultural orientation that addresses student expectations, academic norms, language proficiency levels, and local pedagogical contexts. As Levitt (2016) underscores, educators must understand why specific values dominate certain cultural settings, such as collectivist decision-making

in Chinese classrooms versus individualist critical debate in Western ones, to adapt their teaching philosophies effectively.

Cultural sensitivity training for faculty extends beyond surface-level awareness. Freeman (2015) advocates integrating local perspectives into curricula, such as incorporating Chinese historical narratives into global business case studies. This dual-lens approach enriches content relevance and validates students' cultural identities, fostering trust and engagement. For instance, a foreign professor teaching in a Sino-US program might co-design a module on environmental policy that juxtaposes China's top-down governance with American community-driven sustainability models, prompting students to critique and synthesize both paradigms.

Moreover, ongoing professional development is vital. Regular workshops on culturally responsive pedagogy, such as differentiating instruction for students accustomed to passive learning, equip faculty to bridge pedagogical divides. Köles and Vörös (2011) stress that flipped classrooms or reflective journals can scaffold students' transition from rote memorization to active inquiry, aligning with TNHE's transformative goals. Collaborative forums where foreign and local faculty share best practices further harmonize teaching strategies, ensuring consistency in fostering global competencies.

Student transformation is catalyzed when faculty preparedness intersects with intentional program design. For example, pre-departure briefings for international residencies might include simulations of cross-cultural workplace conflicts, while

post-residency debriefs could involve reflective essays connecting experiences to theoretical frameworks. Such structured immersion and faculty mentorship shift students from passive observers to proactive intercultural negotiators, a hallmark of TL.

TNHE's promise of global readiness is realized only when cultural sensitivity and faculty preparedness are prioritized. By embedding these principles into instructor training, curriculum design, and assessment practices, TNHE programs transcend mere knowledge transfer, empowering students to navigate, respect, and reshape the complexities of a multicultural world.

The Role of Communication in Fostering Cross-Cultural Understanding in China's TNHE Programs

Effective communication bridges cultural divides and fosters TL in China's TNHE programs. Structured classroom activities, such as cross-cultural debates, collaborative projects, and peer-led discussions, enable students to navigate differences between hierarchical, exam-oriented Chinese learning traditions and Western pedagogies emphasizing open inquiry. For example, mixed student teams designing marketing campaigns for dual-region product launches must reconcile collectivist Chinese consumer behaviors with individualist Western trends, cultivating pragmatic problem-solving skills. Such interactions help students transition from passive learning to active engagement, building adaptability and empathy. Beyond formal settings, informal exchanges—cultural festivals, mentorship programs, and

peer language initiatives organically strengthen trust. One professor observed, “Students bonding over dumpling-making workshops later collaborate more effectively in academic tasks.”

Faculty collaboration further models cross-cultural synergy. Co-teaching and joint curriculum design integrate global theories with local applications, such as adapting Western case studies to China’s digital economy. However, institutional communication challenges persist, particularly in multilateral partnerships. Administrators highlighted clashes between Western priorities (e.g., critical thinking exercises) and Chinese emphases on exam performance in interview discussions. To address this, stakeholders advocate proactive relationship-building, informal exchanges between administrative teams, balanced negotiation frameworks, and mutual respect for core academic principles. “Not every issue needs unanimity,” noted a program director, “but shared goals must anchor communication.”

Persistent barriers include language gaps, contrasting communication styles (indirect vs. direct feedback), and digital miscommunication in hybrid classrooms. Interviewees propose solutions: mandatory language support courses, cultural sensitivity training, and technology tools like AI translators and collaborative platforms. Administrators and faculty also recommended expanding global virtual team projects and redesigning assessments to reward communication processes, not just outputs. Ultimately, TNHE programs thrive when cultural differences are reframed as catalysts for innovation rather than obstacles.

By prioritizing intentional communication in curricula, faculty practices, and institutional partnerships, these programs equip students to lead in a globally interconnected world, transforming classrooms into microcosms of cross-cultural understanding.

New Perspectives for Problem-Solving

The continuing integration of language proficiency, critical reflection, facilitative learning, and cultural understanding in China's TNHE programs creates a dynamic ecosystem that fosters innovative problem-solving perspectives.

Critical reflection, questioning assumptions, analyzing biases, and re-evaluating experiences compel students to challenge conventional problem-solving methods. In TNHE programs, reflective tasks (e.g., journals, debates) push learners to dissect why specific approaches succeed in one context but fail in another. For instance, reflecting on why a marketing strategy effective in Europe struggles in China might reveal cultural nuances around consumer trust or digital platforms. This reflective practice nurtures intellectual humility and openness to unorthodox solutions.

Facilitative, student-centered pedagogies like project-based learning, peer-led discussions, and simulations can create environments where diverse perspectives collide and coalesce. Students' interactions with professors and peers from diverse cultural backgrounds foster creativity and innovation. Interviewees mentioned that their programs use case studies and simulations to encourage students to analyze

problems from multiple angles. Global team projects can further enhance students' problem-solving abilities by learning to approach challenges from various perspectives. In mixed-cultural teams, students must negotiate conflicting ideas, leverage complementary strengths, and experiment with trial-and-error strategies. The facilitative process ensures that problem-solving becomes a collective, iterative journey rather than a top-down directive.

Applying TL in TNHE in Chinese universities effectively prepares students for the demands of a globalized workforce. These programs foster significant cognitive and behavioral changes by emphasizing critical thinking, facilitative learning, cultural understanding, and innovative problem-solving. One alumna mentioned significant changes in her behavior and cognitive abilities, such as increased engagement with foreign business partners and improved communication skills in a multicultural environment. The professors also observed that many students exhibited significant changes in their behavior and cognitive abilities, such as improved efficiency in time management and the ability to solve complicated problems involving multiple stakeholders. One program administrator who tracked alumni career progression, noting their graduates shifting toward regional/global roles and expanded responsibilities as evidence of transformative outcomes.

Summary

The rapid development of TNHE in China has brought numerous benefits, including enhanced educational quality and global competitiveness (Mok & Han,

2016), increased cultural exchange, and the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. The findings from the research work including interviews conducted with professors, administrators, and alumni involved in the TNHE programs, the small forums conducted among different TNHE programs systematically address each research question by identifying challenges (e.g., language barriers, curriculum misalignment, cultural passivity) and proposing actionable solutions (e.g., language support, localized curricula, cross-cultural training). They reveal that English proficiency is a gatekeeper for engagement, curriculum/pedagogy adaptations are vital for relevance, and cultural sensitivity is foundational to bridging educational divides. By aligning these insights, the study provides a roadmap for enhancing TNHE programs' efficacy in China's globalized educational landscape. All stakeholders need to collaborate effectively to address the challenges and ensure TNHE's success and sustainability. By fostering partnerships, promoting cultural understanding, and maintaining high education standards, TNHE can continue to thrive and contribute to the globalization of higher education.

Contributions and Impacts

This study proposes a transformative framework centered on critical incident analysis and disorienting dilemmas within transnational education contexts. Building on this reflective process, the framework advocates for developing inclusive global perspectives, necessitating the adoption of cross-cultural mindsets and advanced intercultural communication competencies. This research work enables participants to

reevaluate entrenched beliefs and implement practices aligned with transformed understandings, such as redesigning curricula to integrate multicultural pedagogies, adapting assessment methods to honor diverse academic traditions, or initiating cross-border research collaborations.

The study contributes theoretically by contextualizing TL within TNHE, emphasizing how critical incidents disrupt ethnocentric paradigms. Methodologically, it demonstrates the utility of reflective dialogue and cross-cultural mentorship in fostering global competence. Practically, it offers institutions actionable strategies for designing culturally responsive programs and professional development initiatives. By bridging reflection, perspective transformation, and evidence-based evaluation, this research provides a replicable model for enhancing equity and intercultural efficacy in globalized educational settings, ultimately preparing stakeholders to navigate and reshape the challenges of transnational education.

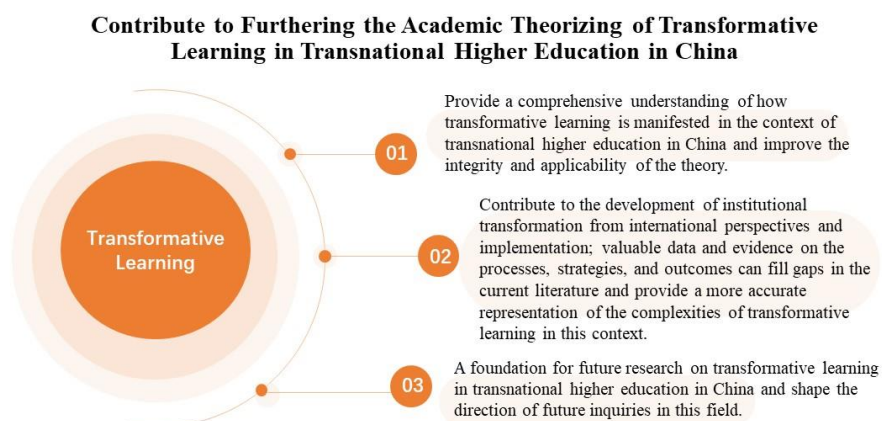


Figure 2. The Contribution of the Research Work

As shown in Figure 2, this study on TL in China's TNHE holds significant potential to advance theoretical discourse within the TL field, particularly by addressing critical gaps in non-Western contexts. Existing scholarship on TL remains predominantly Eurocentric, with limited empirical exploration in Asian, African, and Latin American settings (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023). This research contributes a nuanced, context-specific understanding of transformative processes by systematically investigating how TL manifests within Sino-foreign educational collaborations, thereby enhancing the theory's integrity and cross-cultural applicability. Through in-depth analysis of Chinese students' and educators' experiences in TNHE environments, such as navigating pedagogical clashes or reconciling collectivist and individualist learning norms, the study identifies novel interpretations of TL, expanding its conceptual boundaries and refining its relevance to globalized education.

Furthermore, the research responds to critiques of TL's overemphasis on individual transformation by exploring its collective and institutional dimensions. Scholars have argued that TL frameworks often neglect systemic and organizational change, particularly in transnational contexts where cultural and structural complexities intersect (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023, p. 9). This study addresses this gap by examining how TNHE institutions transform, drawing on insights from a complex interactive system and multicultural background. For instance, it investigates how Sino-foreign partnerships adapt curricula, assessment practices, and faculty development programs to foster organizational learning aligned with TL principles.

By documenting these processes, the research generates empirical evidence on strategies for institutional TL, offering a model that balances individual growth with collective adaptation.

The findings also provide a foundational framework for future studies on TL in TNHE, which are addressed in the last part of the paper. These insights can guide subsequent inquiries into how TL operates in diverse geopolitical and pedagogical contexts, particularly in regions undergoing rapid educational internationalization.

This research advances TL theory by contextualizing it within China's TNHE landscape, addressing theoretical critiques through institutional and collective lenses, and establishing a scaffold for cross-cultural comparative studies. Its contributions enrich academic discourse and equip policymakers and educators with evidence-based strategies to design TL-informed, globally responsive educational systems.

Conclusion, Implications and Future Research

This study explored the application of TL within the context of TNHE in China, focusing on Sino-foreign cooperative programs. It addressed three primary research questions: (1) the influence of students' English proficiency on their learning experience and critical reflection, (2) the impact of curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methodologies on student TL experiences, and (3) the manifestation and addressing of cultural differences within TNHE programs in China.

The findings revealed that TL, characterized by critical thinking, facilitative teaching methods, cultural understanding, and innovative problem-solving, plays a pivotal role in fostering cognitive and behavioral changes among students in TNHE programs. Key challenges include cultural differences, language barriers, faculty recruitment and retention, and curriculum localization. Strategies to mitigate these challenges include comprehensive onboarding for foreign professors, language support for students, and integrating localized content into curricula.

The study also highlighted the importance of critical reflection and experiential learning in achieving transformative outcomes. Students who engaged in TL experiences reported increased multicultural engagement, better time management, and improved communication skills in the workplace. Faculty and administrators emphasized the need for facilitative teaching approaches and cultural sensitivity to enhance the learning experience. The integration of AI tools, while offering opportunities for enhanced learning, also presented challenges, particularly in maintaining the balance between technology and critical thinking.

Overall, the research underscores the potential of TL to prepare students for global careers and enhance their adaptability in diverse cultural contexts. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the proposed strategies, TNHE programs can improve their effectiveness and deliver real value to students and institutions.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings have several practical implications for educators, administrators, and policymakers involved in TNHE programs.

Curriculum Design and Localization

TNHE programs should prioritize the development of localized curricula that reflect both global perspectives and local contexts. This involves close collaboration between home and host institutions to ensure that course content is relevant to the Chinese business environment while maintaining international standards. Regular updates to teaching materials and the inclusion of industry professionals can further enhance the relevance and practicality of the curriculum.

Faculty Development and Support

Recruiting and retaining qualified faculty with international experience is crucial for the success of TNHE programs. Providing ongoing professional development opportunities, research support, and recognition for teaching excellence can help maintain high teaching standards. Additionally, foreign professors should receive comprehensive onboarding and cultural orientation to adapt to the Chinese educational environment.

Language Support and Cultural Sensitivity

Language barriers remain a significant challenge in TNHE programs. Offering prerequisite English language courses, language workshops, and support for non-native English speakers can improve students' language proficiency and overall

learning experience. Cultural orientation programs for both faculty and students can foster mutual understanding and respect, enhancing the classroom environment.

Integration of Technology

While AI and other technological tools offer opportunities for enhanced learning, their integration should be carefully managed to avoid overreliance on technology at the expense of critical thinking. Faculty should be trained to incorporate AI tools effectively into their teaching, ensuring that technology complements rather than replaces human interaction and emotional connections in the classroom.

Communication and Collaboration

Effective communication between partner institutions is essential for the smooth operation of TNHE programs. Building informal relationships through team-building activities and interactive sessions can enhance the TL experience. Administrators should maintain open and flexible communication channels to address cultural and educational differences, ensuring that all stakeholders are aligned in their goals and expectations.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the application of TL in TNHE programs in China, several areas warrant further investigation.

Longitudinal Studies

Future research could explore the long-term impact of TL on students' career trajectories and personal development. Longitudinal studies tracking alumni over several years could provide deeper insights into the lasting effects of TNHE programs on their professional and personal lives.

Comparative Studies

Comparative studies between TNHE programs in China and other countries could illuminate the unique challenges and opportunities different regions face. Such studies could help identify best practices and transferable strategies across cultural and educational contexts.

Institutional Transformation

While this study focused on individual TL experiences, future research could explore the potential for institutional transformation within TNHE programs. Investigating how institutions can adapt their structures, policies, and practices to support TL on a broader scale could provide valuable insights for administrators and policymakers.

Role of Technology

As the integration of AI and other technologies continues to evolve, future research should explore the optimal balance between technology and traditional teaching methods in fostering TL. Studies could investigate how different

technological tools can be effectively integrated into TNHE programs to enhance learning outcomes without compromising critical thinking and human interaction.

To explore these dynamics, interdisciplinary research, spanning cognitive science, education, and AI ethics, could employ mixed methods: longitudinal studies tracking how AI interaction shapes decision-making patterns, experimental comparisons of problem-solving with and without AI assistance, and qualitative analyses of user responses to bias-aware AI interfaces. Developing pedagogical frameworks that integrate AI tools while emphasizing reflective questioning and ethical evaluation could illuminate strategies to harness AI as a catalyst for deeper intellectual growth rather than a crutch. Such research must prioritize ethical considerations and the preservation of human agency in an increasingly automated world.

Cultural Adaptation and Inclusivity

Further research is needed to explore how TNHE programs can better address cultural differences and promote inclusivity. Studies could investigate the effectiveness of various cultural orientation programs and strategies for fostering intercultural communication and understanding among students and faculty.

By addressing these areas, future research can build on this study's findings and contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of TNHE programs, ensuring that they continue to deliver meaningful and transformative educational experiences for students in an increasingly globalized world.

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