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Exploring the Dynamics of Mixed Graduate Classrooms in Country and Area Studies: A Case Study of Chinese and International Students Learning Together

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Peer Review Information	Abstract
<p><i>Submission: 21 March 2026</i></p> <p><i>Revision: 13 April 2026</i></p> <p><i>Acceptance: 27 April 2026</i></p> <p>Keywords</p> <p><i>Mixed Classrooms, Internationalization, Higher Education, Intercultural Learning.</i></p>	<p>As Chinese universities increasingly enroll international students alongside domestic students, mixed graduate classrooms have emerged as important sites of intercultural learning and academic exchange. This qualitative study explores the dynamics, benefits, and challenges of mixed graduate classrooms within the International and Regional Studies program at China Three Gorges University (CTGU). Drawing on questionnaire data collected from three international students (from Iraq, Ghana, and Uganda) and three Chinese students, the study employs thematic analysis to examine how culturally diverse learning environments shape students' academic experiences, intercultural competence, and collaborative learning outcomes. The findings reveal five major themes: diverse perspectives, skill development, successful collaboration, cross-cultural friendship, and effective pedagogy. Both Chinese and international students reported overwhelmingly positive learning experiences, noting that exposure to multiple viewpoints enriched their understanding of international and regional issues. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on internationalization of higher education in China and offers practical recommendations for educators and program administrators seeking to optimize mixed classroom environments.</p>

Introduction

1. Background of the Study

The internationalization of higher education has become a defining feature of the twenty-first century academic landscape. Countries across the world are actively seeking to attract international students, develop cross-border academic partnerships, and integrate global perspectives into their curricula (Knight, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2007). China, in particular, has experienced a remarkable transformation in its higher education system over the past two decades. The country has risen to become one of the top destinations for international students in Asia, driven by government initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China

Scholarship Council (CSC) program, and the China Education Modernization 2035 Plan (Zhang & Liao, 2021; Liu et al., 2025).

As of 2020, China ranked as the fourth most popular study-abroad destination globally, attracting students from Africa, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and beyond (Chow et al., 2024). This influx of international students has created a unique educational environment in which Chinese and international graduate students increasingly find themselves learning together in the same classrooms.

2. Importance of Country and Area Studies in a Globalized World

Country and Area Studies programs are inherently interdisciplinary and globally oriented, making them particularly well-suited for mixed classroom environments. These programs require students to analyze complex political, economic, cultural, and social dynamics across national and regional boundaries (Altbach, 2009). At China Three Gorges University (CTGU), the International and Regional Studies program enrolls both Chinese and international graduate students in shared courses, creating a natural laboratory for intercultural exchange and collaborative learning.

3. The Rise of International Education and Mixed Graduate Classrooms

Ma and Wen (2018) identified two primary models for organizing international students in Chinese universities: the separation mode, where international students are placed in exclusive classes, and the merging mode, where they are integrated with domestic students. Research has shown that the merging model offers greater potential for intercultural learning and the development of global competencies (Zou & Yu, 2021). However, the implementation of mixed classrooms is not without challenges, including language barriers, differences in academic cultures, and varying levels of class participation (Heng, 2018; Tran, 2020).

4. Problem Statement

Despite the growing number of international students in Chinese universities, relatively few studies have examined the lived experiences of students in mixed graduate classrooms, particularly in programs focused on international and regional studies. Most existing research has focused on the challenges faced by international students in isolation, without considering the perspectives of Chinese students who share the same learning environment (Ding, 2016; Larbi & Fu, 2017). This study addresses this gap by examining the experiences and perceptions of both Chinese and international students in mixed classrooms at CTGU.

5. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived benefits of mixed graduate classrooms for both Chinese and international students?
2. How do mixed classrooms contribute to students' intercultural competence and understanding of international issues?

3. What pedagogical practices can enhance the effectiveness of mixed graduate classrooms?

6. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature on internationalization of higher education in China by providing empirical evidence from a specific institutional context. The findings offer practical insights for educators and policymakers seeking to create inclusive and effective learning environments for culturally diverse student populations.

7. Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology. Chapter 4 presents the findings. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the literature. Chapter 6 provides conclusions and recommendations.

Literature Review

1. Educational Theories on Multicultural and Mixed Classrooms

Multicultural education, as conceptualized by Banks (2004), is an approach to teaching that seeks to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups. It emphasizes not only the integration of diverse content into the curriculum but also the transformation of pedagogical practices to be inclusive and responsive to cultural differences. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides a useful framework for understanding mixed classrooms, suggesting that learning is fundamentally a social process that occurs through interaction with others. Contact theory (Allport, 1954) further suggests that meaningful intergroup contact, under favorable conditions such as equal status and common goals, can reduce prejudice and foster positive intergroup attitudes.

2. Internationalization of Higher Education in China

China's higher education internationalization strategy has evolved significantly over the past four decades. The Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, has accelerated this trend by establishing educational partnerships with countries along the BRI routes (Liu et al., 2025). The concept of Internationalization at Home (IaH) has gained particular traction in the Chinese context, referring to the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the curriculum and campus life (Nilsson, 2003;

Qu & Dai, 2024). Mixed classrooms represent one of the most direct forms of IaH.

Research on international students' experiences in Chinese universities has identified both positive outcomes, such as increased cross-cultural understanding, and significant challenges, including language barriers and social isolation (Wen & Hu, 2019; Heng, 2018). However, fewer studies have examined these dynamics from a dual perspective that includes both Chinese and international students' experiences.

3. Teaching Country and Area Studies: Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Country and Area Studies programs are uniquely positioned to benefit from mixed classroom arrangements. These programs cover topics such as international relations, regional politics, and cultural dynamics, all of which are enriched by the firsthand knowledge and diverse perspectives that international students bring to class discussions (Altbach, 2009). When students from different countries study these subjects together, they bring lived experiences that transform abstract academic concepts into concrete realities. For example, a discussion about China's foreign policy toward Africa takes on entirely new dimensions when an African student can share personal observations about infrastructure projects in their hometown, or when a Middle Eastern student can describe the local impact of BRI-funded energy partnerships. This experiential dimension of learning is particularly valuable in Country and Area Studies, where understanding local contexts and perspectives is essential for rigorous academic analysis.

4. Challenges in Mixed Graduate Education

Language barriers remain the most commonly cited obstacle in mixed classrooms, particularly in Chinese universities where courses may be delivered in Mandarin, English, or a combination of both (Tran, 2020). Cultural differences in learning styles also pose challenges: Chinese students tend to be socialized into a more teacher-centered educational culture, while international students may be more accustomed to participatory, discussion-based learning (Zou & Yu, 2021). Research has also documented a tendency toward social separation between Chinese and international students (Ding, 2016; Larbi & Fu, 2017).

5. Pedagogical Strategies for Inclusive Teaching

Scholars have identified several strategies that enhance mixed classrooms: structured group work pairing domestic and international students (Lacaste et al., 2022), case studies from multiple national contexts (O'Reilly et al., 2023), language support mechanisms, and culturally responsive teaching that adapts instructional methods to acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2010; Naz et al., 2023).

6. Gaps in Existing Research

Several gaps remain in the literature. Most studies have focused on elite universities in major cities, while regional universities like CTGU remain underexplored. The dual perspective approach examining both Chinese and international students has been rare. Few studies have examined mixed classrooms within Country and Area Studies programs. This study addresses these gaps.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018) to explore the dynamics of mixed graduate classrooms at CTGU. The case study method allows for in-depth examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context.

2. Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the International and Regional Studies program at China Three Gorges University, Yichang, Hubei Province. Six participants were recruited using purposive sampling: three international students (from Iraq, Ghana, and Uganda) and three Chinese students. All were graduate students enrolled in the program at the time of data collection. This sample size is appropriate for qualitative research focused on generating rich descriptions of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires consisting of ten questions for each group. The questions were designed to elicit detailed written responses about participants' experiences in mixed classrooms, with a focus on benefits, collaboration, skill development, and intercultural interaction. International students responded in English, while Chinese students could respond in English or Chinese. Questionnaires were distributed in print and returned within one week. This approach was chosen over face-to-face interviews to give participants sufficient time to reflect on their experiences and provide thoughtful, detailed

written responses. The written format also reduced the potential influence of interviewer presence on participants' responses, allowing for greater candor, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as cultural differences and language challenges.

4. Data Analysis Approach

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final report. The analysis was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data. Chinese-language responses were translated into English by the researcher.

5. Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants

could withdraw at any time. Responses were anonymized using participant codes (IS-01 through IS-03 for international students; CS-01 through CS-03 for Chinese students). The study was conducted in accordance with CTGU's ethical guidelines.

Findings

The thematic analysis of questionnaire data revealed five major themes capturing the experiences of both Chinese and international students. This chapter presents participant demographics, a thematic summary, and detailed findings supported by direct quotes from participants.

1. Participant Overview

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the six participants. All three international students completed the full questionnaire (10/10 questions), while two of the three Chinese students responded to seven of ten questions.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Code	Nationality	Program	Year	Gender	Group	Responses
IS-01	Iraqi	Int'l & Regional Studies	Final	Male	International	10/10
IS-02	Ghanaian	International Relations	Final	Female	International	10/10
IS-03	Ugandan	Int'l & Regional Studies	Final	Male	International	10/10
CS-01	Chinese	Int'l & Regional Studies	3rd	Female	Chinese	7/10
CS-02	Chinese	Int'l & Regional Studies	3rd	Male	Chinese	10/10
CS-03	Chinese	Int'l & Regional Studies	3rd	Female	Chinese	7/10

Note: 'Responses' indicates the number of questions answered out of 10 total. Some participants did not complete all questions.

2. Overview of Themes

Five major themes emerged from the data analysis. Table 2 provides a summary of each

theme with representative direct quotes from both groups of students.

Table 2: Thematic Summary of Findings with Representative Quotes

Theme	Sub-theme	International Students	Chinese Students
1. Diverse Perspectives	Broadened worldview	<i>"Before coming here, I only thought about my own perspective. But when I talked to my Chinese teachers and friends, I realized that every subject has its own face and perspective."</i> — IS-01	<i>"This interaction has made me realize that many international issues do not have a single dimension as often portrayed in news reports."</i> — CS-02
	Multiple viewpoints	<i>"A Chinese student might see state sovereignty differently than I do, and that disagreement forces me to defend my position or change my mind. That is real learning."</i>	<i>"They teach me that we should use different perspectives to deal with international issues."</i> — CS-01

		— IS-02	
2. Skill Development	Communication & language	"My English has improved because English is our common point for our conversations and I have always had to speak more openly and clearly." — IS-01	"Mixed classroom can help me be more outgoing and talk more." — CS-01
	Cross-cultural skills	"I have learned how to navigate different communication styles, especially indirect versus direct feedback." — IS-02	"I have learned many practical cross-cultural communication skills and soft knowledge, such as social etiquette and business customs." — CS-02
3. Successful Collaboration	Group projects	"For a group project on the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, my Chinese partner shared local news articles and government reports. We presented together and our professor said our work was the most balanced." — IS-02	"He shared specific changes brought by the initiative to infrastructure development in his hometown. This first-hand information greatly enriched our report." — CS-02
	Complementary strengths	"I am good at organizing and planning, he is good at showing and talking, so we worked together successfully based on mutual understanding." — IS-01	"He was good at expression and presentation, I was good at organizing materials. We cooperated smoothly and even became friends." — CS-03
4. Cross-Cultural Friendship	In-class bonding	"When I didn't understand a lesson, a friend from Chinese students would explain it to me, and when they had problems, I would help them. These small acts build true friendships." — IS-01	"When we learn together, we can talk about something." — CS-01
	Beyond classroom	"My Chinese classmates often invite me to eat at the canteen, where we continue discussing class topics but also share food and jokes. That is how real friendship starts." — IS-02	"I learned about their real-life habits, interpersonal approaches and attitudes. This is living knowledge that textbooks cannot offer." — CS-03
5. Effective Pedagogy	Case studies	"When the professor compares China-Ghana relations with China-Pakistan relations, both Chinese and international students have some prior knowledge." — IS-02	"Different students from different countries will have different perspectives." — CS-01
	Group work & activities	"Mixed group work sessions between Chinese and international students, extra-curricular team building activities." — IS-03	"Classmates from different cultural backgrounds bring unexpected angles, making classroom discussions consistently fresh." — CS-02

Note: Quotes are presented verbatim from participants' written questionnaire responses. Minor grammatical corrections were not applied to preserve authenticity.

3. Theme 1: Diverse Perspectives

The most prominent theme across all participants was the value of being exposed to diverse perspectives. International students described how studying alongside Chinese classmates fundamentally changed the way they view international issues. As IS-01 explained: "Before coming here, I only thought about my own perspective or the perspective of western media. But when I talked to my Chinese teachers and friends, I realized that every subject has its own face and perspective." IS-02 emphasized that this diversity drives genuine intellectual growth: "A Chinese student might see state sovereignty differently than I do, and that disagreement forces me to defend my position or change my mind. That is real learning."

Chinese students reported parallel benefits. CS-02 stated that interacting with international classmates made her "realize that many international issues do not have a single dimension as often portrayed in news reports." CS-01 similarly noted: "They teach me that we should use different perspectives to deal with international issues." CS-03 added that being in a mixed classroom allows students to experience diverse cultural atmospheres without leaving China: "I can access different countries' cultures and ways of thinking without going abroad."

4. Theme 2: Skill Development

Both groups reported significant skill development resulting from the mixed classroom environment. Language improvement was a key sub-theme. IS-01 noted: "My English has improved because English is our common point for our conversations and I have always had to speak more openly and clearly." On the Chinese side, CS-01 observed: "Mixed classroom can help me be more outgoing and talk more," while CS-03 described becoming less hesitant to speak English as the mixed environment gradually built her confidence.

Beyond language, participants described developing practical cross-cultural competencies. IS-02 highlighted learning "how to navigate different communication styles, especially indirect versus direct feedback." CS-02 described gaining "practical cross-cultural communication skills and soft knowledge, such as social etiquette and business negotiation customs in different countries." IS-03 noted the deepening of his "communication and analytical skills" through cross-cultural academic interactions.

5. Theme 3: Successful Collaboration

Participants provided vivid examples of successful collaborative experiences. IS-02

described a particularly impactful group project: "For a group project on the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, my Chinese partner shared local news articles and government reports that I could not access online. He also helped me understand the policy language. We presented together, and our professor said our work was the most balanced." CS-02 described the same type of collaboration from the Chinese perspective, noting that a Central Asian classmate "shared specific changes brought by the initiative to infrastructure development in his hometown. This first-hand information greatly enriched our report."

The complementary nature of students' strengths emerged as a strong sub-theme. IS-01 explained: "I am good at organizing and planning, he is good at showing and talking, so we worked together successfully based on mutual understanding." CS-03 described a similar dynamic: "He was good at expression and presentation, I was good at organizing materials. We cooperated smoothly and even became friends."

6. Theme 4: Cross-Cultural Friendship

Mixed classrooms were found to be powerful incubators of cross-cultural friendships. IS-01 described how everyday academic interactions build genuine connections: "When I didn't understand a lesson, a friend from Chinese students would explain it to me, and when they had problems, I would help them. These small acts build true friendships." IS-02 described how friendships extend beyond the classroom: "My Chinese classmates often invite me to eat at the canteen, where we continue discussing class topics but also share food and jokes. That is how real friendship starts."

Chinese students valued the informal learning that comes with such friendships. CS-03 noted: "I learned about their real-life habits, interpersonal approaches and attitudes. This is living knowledge that textbooks cannot offer." IS-03 summarized the outcome succinctly: "I have made various friends and colleagues with various strengths and opened my mind further to the world." These findings suggest that cross-cultural friendships formed in mixed classrooms serve a dual function: they provide emotional support that enhances student well-being, and they create informal learning channels through which cultural knowledge is exchanged organically.

The reciprocal nature of these friendships is particularly noteworthy. Rather than one group primarily helping the other, the data reveal a balanced dynamic in which both Chinese and international students contribute to and benefit

from the relationship. IS-01 described this reciprocity clearly: "When I didn't understand a lesson, a friend from Chinese students would explain it to me, and when they had problems, I would help them." This mutual exchange reflects the conditions identified by Allport (1954) as necessary for positive intergroup contact, particularly the element of equal status among participants.

7. Theme 5: Effective Pedagogy

Participants identified specific teaching approaches that work well in mixed classrooms. The use of comparative case studies was highlighted by IS-02: "When the professor compares China-Ghana relations with China-Pakistan relations, both Chinese and international students have some prior knowledge." IS-03 emphasized the value of "mixed group work sessions between Chinese and international students" and "extra-curricular team building activities."

IS-01 provided a comprehensive view of effective pedagogy: "When a teacher uses real examples, everyone understands easier. When there is group work, Chinese and international students learn from and help each other. The use of videos and pictures also stops language barriers and makes it easier to understand." CS-02 added that international classmates "bring unexpected angles for questions and a sense of humor, making classroom discussions consistently fresh."

The importance of instructor attitudes was also highlighted by multiple participants. IS-01 specifically praised the personal commitment of teachers at CTGU: "The teachers' loyalty and attention to the students continues to treat us as close friends or family, which helps us to understand and integrate into our lessons and learning." This finding suggests that beyond specific teaching techniques, the quality of teacher-student relationships plays a crucial role in creating inclusive and effective mixed classroom environments. When instructors demonstrate genuine care for all students regardless of nationality, they model the kind of cross-cultural respect and openness that the program aims to cultivate.

IS-02 offered practical advice for future pedagogical design, recommending that professors should "write key terms in Chinese characters and pinyin on the board" alongside English translations, as "it helps everyone." This bilingual approach to key terminology represents a simple but effective strategy for bridging language gaps while simultaneously enriching all students' academic vocabulary. CS-01 suggested that giving "more time to students

in the mixed classroom" would further enhance the learning experience, acknowledging that cross-cultural communication naturally requires additional time for clarification and discussion.

Discussion

1. Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Literature

The findings are broadly consistent with the existing literature on multicultural education and mixed classrooms. The prominence of diverse perspectives as a theme aligns with Banks' (2004) framework for multicultural education and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, as students from different backgrounds effectively served as knowledge resources for one another. The positive intergroup attitudes reported are consistent with Allport's (1954) contact theory, as the mixed classrooms at CTGU appear to meet the key conditions for positive contact: equal status, common goals, and cooperative interaction.

The challenges identified, particularly language barriers and differences in participation styles, echo findings from previous research (Heng, 2018; Zou & Yu, 2021). However, a notable finding is that participants generally viewed these challenges as manageable and even beneficial for personal growth. This is an important departure from much of the existing literature, which tends to frame language barriers primarily as obstacles. In this study, participants described language challenges as catalysts for improvement. CS-01's observation that the mixed classroom helped her become "more outgoing" and IS-01's report that his English improved through daily conversations suggest that the mixed classroom functions as an immersive language learning environment that complements formal language instruction.

Another significant finding is the role of informal, out-of-classroom interactions in reinforcing the learning that takes place within the formal academic setting. IS-02's description of continuing class discussions over meals in the canteen illustrates how mixed classrooms can generate a culture of continuous learning that extends beyond scheduled class hours. This finding aligns with recent research on internationalization at home (Qu & Dai, 2024), which emphasizes the importance of creating holistic campus environments that support intercultural exchange in both formal and informal settings.

2. Why Mixed Graduate Classrooms Matter for Country and Area Studies

The findings underscore the particular value of mixed classrooms for Country and Area Studies

programs. The firsthand knowledge that international students bring about their home regions transforms abstract concepts into lived realities. When IS-02 provides a ground-level perspective on China-Africa relations, or when CS-02's Central Asian classmate describes BRI's local impact, the classroom becomes a site of authentic knowledge co-construction.

3. Balancing National and International Perspectives in Curriculum Design

The data reveal that mixed classrooms naturally encourage the integration of multiple national and international perspectives. Chinese students reported moving beyond single-dimensional views of global issues, while international students gained deeper appreciation for Chinese perspectives. Comparative case studies were highlighted as particularly effective for achieving this balance.

4. Implications for Pedagogy: Strategies to Foster Integration

Structured Group Work

The findings strongly support structured group work that deliberately pairs Chinese and international students. Instructors should actively design groups that maximize cultural diversity and provide clear guidelines for equitable participation.

Language Support

While language barriers were identified, sustained interaction in mixed classrooms naturally improved students' language skills. Institutional support including bilingual materials and English workshops can further reduce obstacles.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Instructors should create multiple channels for participation, including written contributions, small group discussions, and post-class reflections, ensuring that all students can contribute meaningfully.

5. Answering the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the perceived benefits of mixed graduate classrooms for both Chinese and international students?

The findings provide clear evidence that mixed graduate classrooms generate substantial benefits for both groups. For international students, the primary benefits include: gaining a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Chinese perspectives on international issues (Theme 1); developing improved English communication skills and cross-cultural competencies (Theme 2); building meaningful friendships with Chinese classmates that provide both academic and social support (Theme 4); and experiencing authentic

collaborative learning through group projects that combine diverse expertise (Theme 3). As IS-01 stated, studying in China transformed his worldview: "Before coming here, I only thought about my own perspective... I realized that every subject has its own face and perspective."

For Chinese students, the benefits are equally significant: exposure to diverse global perspectives that challenge single-dimensional thinking (Theme 1); improvement in English language confidence and communication skills (Theme 2); acquisition of practical cross-cultural knowledge that textbooks cannot provide (Theme 4); and preparation for working in globalized professional environments (Theme 3). CS-02 captured this transformation: "This interaction has made me realize that many international issues do not have a single dimension as often portrayed in news reports." The data demonstrate that benefits are mutual and complementary rather than one-directional.

Research Question 2: How do mixed classrooms contribute to students' intercultural competence and understanding of international issues?

Mixed classrooms contribute to intercultural competence through three primary mechanisms identified in the data. First, daily classroom interaction exposes students to fundamentally different ways of thinking about international issues, moving them beyond the perspectives available through media or textbooks in their home countries. IS-02 described this as "real learning" that occurs when students must engage with viewpoints that challenge their assumptions. Second, collaborative group work requires students to negotiate cultural differences in communication styles, work habits, and academic expectations, developing practical intercultural skills in the process. The complementary strengths described by IS-01 and CS-03 illustrate how cross-cultural collaboration produces outcomes that neither group could achieve independently. Third, informal interactions extending beyond the classroom create sustained intercultural engagement that deepens understanding over time. CS-03's observation about gaining "living knowledge" from international classmates captures how interpersonal relationships serve as channels for authentic cultural learning.

Research Question 3: What pedagogical practices can enhance the effectiveness of mixed graduate classrooms?

Participants identified several specific pedagogical practices that enhance mixed classroom effectiveness. Comparative case studies that draw on multiple national contexts were the most frequently cited effective practice,

as noted by IS-02's example of comparing China-Ghana and China-Pakistan relations. Structured group work that deliberately pairs Chinese and international students was highlighted by IS-03 and multiple Chinese participants as essential for fostering interaction. The use of visual materials (videos, images, diagrams) was identified by IS-01 as an effective strategy for overcoming language barriers. Bilingual presentation of key academic terms, as recommended by IS-02, helps bridge language gaps while enriching vocabulary for all students. Finally, the cultivation of warm, family-like teacher-student relationships, as described by IS-01, creates an inclusive atmosphere that encourages participation from all students regardless of cultural background. CS-01's suggestion to allocate additional time for discussion acknowledges the practical reality that cross-cultural communication requires patience and flexibility.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. The sample size of six participants limits generalizability. Written questionnaires may have constrained response depth. The study focuses on one program at one university. The questionnaire design focused primarily on positive experiences, which may have introduced response bias. Future research should employ more balanced instruments and larger samples.

Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the dynamics of mixed graduate classrooms at CTGU through questionnaire data from six participants. Five major themes emerged: diverse perspectives, skill development, successful collaboration, cross-cultural friendship, and effective pedagogy. In response to the three research questions, the study found that: (1) mixed classrooms provide substantial mutual benefits for both Chinese and international students, including broadened worldviews, enhanced communication skills, practical cross-cultural competencies, and meaningful friendships; (2) intercultural competence develops through daily exposure to diverse perspectives, collaborative negotiation of cultural differences, and sustained informal interactions that extend beyond the classroom; and (3) effective pedagogical practices include comparative case studies, structured cross-cultural group work, visual learning materials, bilingual terminology presentation, and the cultivation of inclusive teacher-student relationships.

The study demonstrates that mixed graduate classrooms in Country and Area Studies

programs offer a uniquely valuable educational experience. The combination of academic content focused on international issues with a culturally diverse student body creates conditions for authentic, experiential learning that goes beyond what traditional, homogeneous classrooms can provide. Students from both groups described being transformed by the experience: international students gained nuanced understanding of Chinese perspectives, while Chinese students developed broader, more empathetic views of global issues. These outcomes align with the broader goals of internationalization at home and suggest that mixed classrooms, when properly supported, represent one of the most effective and cost-efficient strategies for internationalizing higher education.

2. Recommendations for Educators and Program Administrators

Universities should promote the merging model of classroom organization. Instructors should receive training in culturally responsive teaching and use comparative case studies, structured group work, and visual materials. Institutions should provide language support services and create opportunities for informal interaction between Chinese and international students. Specifically, the following recommendations are offered based on the findings of this study. First, program administrators should ensure that course enrollment policies actively promote mixed classrooms rather than defaulting to separate sections for Chinese and international students. Second, instructors should design group assignments that require students from different cultural backgrounds to work together, with clear role assignments to ensure equitable participation. Third, universities should establish peer tutoring programs in which advanced Chinese students provide language support to international classmates, while international students offer English conversation practice to Chinese peers. Fourth, programs should organize regular co-curricular activities such as cultural exchange workshops, joint field trips, and informal discussion groups that bring Chinese and international students together outside the classroom.

3. Recommendations for Institutional Policy

Universities should develop policies recognizing effective teaching in mixed classrooms. Faculty training should include intercultural communication and inclusive pedagogy modules. Investment in language resources and mentorship programs pairing experienced

international students with newcomers would facilitate smoother transitions.

4. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should include larger samples, mixed-methods designs, and longitudinal studies tracking intercultural competence development. Incorporating instructor perspectives and conducting comparative studies across multiple institutions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of mixed classroom dynamics.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire for International Students

1. What do you enjoy most about studying with Chinese classmates?
2. How has studying in China broadened your understanding of international and regional issues?
3. What new skills or knowledge have you gained from being in a mixed classroom?
4. Can you share a positive experience of collaborating with a Chinese classmate?
5. How has the classroom environment helped you build cross-cultural friendships?
6. In what ways do your Chinese classmates help you during your studies?
7. What makes studying in a mixed classroom more interesting than a homogeneous one?
8. How do class discussions benefit from having students from different countries?
9. What aspects of the teaching approach work well for both Chinese and international students?
10. What is one thing you would recommend to future international students about studying in China?

Appendix B: Questionnaire for Chinese Students

1. What do you enjoy most about having international classmates in your courses?
2. How has interacting with international students changed your perspective on global issues?
3. What have you learned from international students that you could not learn from textbooks?
4. Can you share a positive experience of working or studying with an international classmate?
5. How has the mixed classroom helped improve your English or communication skills?
6. In what ways does the mixed classroom make learning more interesting and dynamic?
7. How do different cultural perspectives in class enrich your understanding of the subject?
8. Do you feel the mixed classroom prepares you better for a globalized workplace? How?
9. What do you appreciate about the way international students participate in class?
10. What is one suggestion to make mixed classrooms even more beneficial for everyone?

Appendix C: Participant Demographics

IS-01: Iraqi, Male, International and Regional Studies, Final Year

IS-02: Ghanaian, Female, International Relations, Final Year

IS-03: Ugandan, Male, International and Regional Studies, Final Year

CS-01: Chinese, Female, International and Regional Studies, 3rd Year

CS-02: Chinese, Male, International and Regional Studies, 3rd Year

CS-03: Chinese, Female, International and Regional Studies, 3rd Year

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

A standardized informed consent form was provided to all participants prior to data collection. The form outlined the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality protections, and the right to withdraw at any time. Signed consent forms are retained by the researcher.