

Reflective Essay: From Host to Guest – A Journey of Intercultural Exchange and Personal Growth

Introduction

Reflection is a powerful process that transforms experience into learning by enabling individuals to revisit events, examine their responses, and derive insights that inform future action (Moon 2004). In this essay, I critically reflect on two pivotal phases of my life: first, hosting a delegation of Malaysian students at my Chinese high school; and second, my role reversal as an international student at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom. While both episodes involved intercultural engagement, the latter exposed me to profound academic challenges. By juxtaposing these experiences and grounding my reflections in established theoretical frameworks, I explore how intercultural dynamics and academic adaptation have shaped my personal and intellectual growth.

Hosting Malaysian Guests in China

Context and Activities

On a crisp autumn morning at 8:30 AM, a coach carrying teachers and students from an international school in Malaysia rolled through the gates of my Chinese high school. As a senior student representative, I joined my classmates on the courtyard steps for a formal welcome ceremony. Our principals exchanged speeches emphasising friendship and mutual understanding. The visiting students then performed a Malay folk melody on the flute, its clear, breathy notes both novel and enchanting. In response, our school troupe showcased a calligraphy demonstration—brush gliding over rice paper—and a modern qipao fan dance, blending tradition with contemporary flair.

Following the performances, delegations exchanged symbolic gifts: the Malaysian group presented intricately carved wooden bookmarks, and we reciprocated with hand-painted silk fans decorated with Chinese landscapes. I felt the weight of cultural ambassadorship: each gift bore stories beyond mere objects.

I then led two teams through a series of immersive workshops. In the calligraphy class, I guided my guests' hands as they grappled with the strokes of “永” (yǒng), learning that mastery lay in slow, deliberate motion. Next, I conducted a campus tour—showing our extensive library, science laboratories, and art studios—pausing to explain how each facility supported our learning. In the pottery workshop, side by side at the wheel, we shaped clay vessels; I watched their laughter as rims wobbled, realising that creativity transcended language. Finally, on the school lawn, we practised Taiji under the gentle sway of morning light. The slow, balanced movements embodied Chinese philosophical ideas of harmony, and as we moved in unison, cultural barriers momentarily dissolved.

Reflective Insights

Reflecting on this hosting role, three lessons stand out:

1. **Immersive Participation:** True cultural exchange flourishes when guests actively participate rather than passively observe (Byram 1997). By inviting Malaysian students into calligraphy, pottery, and Taiji, we fostered a sense of shared discovery.
2. **Ambassadorship Responsibility:** As hosts and cultural intermediaries, we bore the responsibility of creating an environment of warmth, respect, and genuine curiosity (Fantini 2000). Every speech, gift exchange, and workshop contributed to building trust.
3. **Reciprocal Learning:** Although I guided the activities, I too learned—about the elegance of Malay musical scales, their communal performance style, and the way a simple carved bookmark could encapsulate identity (Deardorff 2006). This reciprocity deepened my appreciation for both my own and others' cultures.

These insights provided a foundation for my future intercultural endeavours, teaching me that fostering genuine connection hinges on shared experience and mutual respect.

Transition to Warwick: Role Reversal

Upon arriving at the University of Warwick, I experienced a dramatic inversion of roles: from cultural authority at home to cultural novice abroad. In China, I led demonstrations in calligraphy and Taiji; in the UK, I found myself navigating cryptic assignment briefs,

unfamiliar library catalogues, and rhetorical conventions of British academia. This shift forced me to confront my assumptions about learning, communication, and confidence.

Detailed Reflection on Academic Discomfort

The academic challenges I faced at Warwick touched every aspect of university life: classroom participation, independent study, academic writing, feedback reception, email communication, and group collaboration.

Seminar Participation and Classroom Dynamics

One of my earliest shocks was the seminar format ubiquitous at Warwick. Unlike the lecture-centred model of my Chinese high school—in which teachers delivered content and students memorised notes—seminars demanded active dialogue, critique, and debate (Biggs & Tang 2011). In my first seminar on algorithms, the tutor posed open-ended questions and expected robust peer discussion. I froze, anxious that my English pronunciation might betray me or that my ideas would seem simplistic. My silence felt like evidence of inadequacy and “otherness.”

Over subsequent weeks, I adopted a two-pronged strategy. First, I **prepared speaking points** by drafting brief reflections on the readings before each class (Hyland 2009). Second, I **practised informally** with supportive international peers, simulating seminar questions to build fluency. Gradually, I realised that thoughtful pauses were valued in UK pedagogy as evidence of reflection rather than incompetence (Leask 2009). By the end of the term, I contributed more confidently, experiencing the empowering sense of intellectual ownership that seminar engagement affords.

Independent Study and Self-Directed Learning

Warwick's curriculum places heavy emphasis on self-directed learning: students are expected to locate resources, manage time, and synthesise information with minimal

supervision (Race 2001). In contrast, my Chinese high school provided rigid timetables and step-by-step guidance towards assessments. Faced with this academic freedom, I initially struggled with **time management** and **resource navigation**. My first essay deadline loomed while I remained perplexed by the library's online databases.

To adapt, I attended **library induction sessions** and learned to use Boolean search terms and subject filters. I also created a **structured study timetable**, blocking out time for research, writing, and revision. Joining a **peer study group** provided external accountability and collective problem-solving. These measures transformed my approach from reactive to proactive, equipping me with transferable skills for future scholarly endeavours (Smith & Smith 2018).

Academic Writing and Referencing Conventions

Transitioning from the narrative, moral-reflection style prevalent in Chinese essays to the analytical, evidence-based structure expected at Warwick presented a formidable challenge. Contrary to my earlier draft, I **did not** attend writing-centre tutorials; the culture shock and fear that my English was “not good enough” deterred me from optional support sessions. Instead, I **learned independently** by **carefully reviewing** my tutors' written feedback on each assignment and by **searching online** for authoritative guides on Harvard-style referencing and academic phrasing. This self-directed learning taught me to distinguish proper paraphrasing from patchwriting and to format in-text citations and reference lists correctly—skills that strengthened the clarity and credibility of my arguments (Pecorari 2008; Swales & Feak 2012).

Receiving Feedback and Iterative Improvement

In my Chinese education, feedback often arrived solely as a grade, offering little guidance. At Warwick, tutors provided **formative feedback** in the margins, posing reflective questions and highlighting areas for development (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Initially overwhelmed by the volume of critique, I interpreted red-ink comments as personal shortcomings, exacerbating my imposter syndrome. Over time, I learned to reframe this feedback as a **growth tool**: I consulted the written remarks closely, maintained a log of common errors, and set targeted objectives for each subsequent

draft. This iterative process not only enhanced my analytical skills but also nurtured a **growth mindset** (Dweck 2006).

Formal Email Communication

A further, unexpected hurdle was mastering the British convention of formal email correspondence with faculty and staff. Unfamiliar with crafting polite, concise emails, I hesitated to contact tutors—even when clarification was needed. To overcome this, I **researched online**, consulting university “how-to” guides and sample templates that outlined appropriate salutations, tone, and sign-off conventions. Drafting my first formal email became an exercise in applied intercultural communication, reinforcing my ability to bridge the gap between travel confidence and academic interactions (Hyland 2009).

Group Work and Collaborative Learning

Group projects at Warwick emphasise **diverse contributions** and shared leadership, a contrast to teacher-led group tasks in China. In my first software engineering project, divergent work styles—some members advocating rapid prototyping, others, like me, favouring meticulous planning—led to miscommunication and uneven workloads. Drawing on my high-school experience of organising cultural events, I proposed a **project charter** that clarified roles, timelines, and quality benchmarks. I facilitated consensus on coding standards and documentation protocols, demonstrating that structured communication and negotiation are vital in multicultural teams (Hofstede 2001).

Comparative Analysis of Host and Guest Roles

Aspect **Hosting in China** **Studying in the UK**

Role Cultural facilitator and authority Cultural newcomer and learner

Primary Responsibility Plan and lead immersive cultural activities Adapt, learn independently, and integrate

Power Dynamics Position of expertise Minority status, seeking guidance

Key Skills Developed Leadership, event coordination, cultural mediation Self-directed learning, academic writing, critical thinking

Emotional Arc Pride → responsibility → reciprocal engagement Anxiety → adjustment → confidence

This comparison reveals that while both roles required **cultural empathy**, **communication**, and **resilience**, the contexts called for distinct applications: hosting emphasised scaffolding others' learning, whereas studying abroad honed my capacity for self-scaffolding and metacognition.

Theoretical Integration

My journey aligns with **Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle** (1984): hosting and studying abroad provided concrete experiences; my written reflections represent reflective observation; I have formulated abstract concepts about intercultural competence and academic adaptation; and I continue to experiment by organising new cultural initiatives and refining my study strategies. Similarly, **Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence** (2006) charts my progression from an open attitude to intercultural knowledge, skill development, and desired outcomes of mutual understanding and effective communication.

Forward Strategy and Continuing Growth

Looking ahead, I plan to:

1. **Establish a "China–UK Academic Forum"** at Warwick, pairing Chinese and British students to co-author blog posts on effective learning strategies.
2. **Integrate intercultural communication modules** into my final-year computing project, exploring design principles for globally accessible user interfaces.
3. **Pursue additional language learning**—perhaps basic Portuguese—to

prepare for future exchange opportunities, thereby reinforcing the host–guest experiential cycle.

4. **Contribute to academic teaching** by presenting at student-led conferences on best practices in intercultural pedagogy.

Conclusion

The contrasting experiences of hosting Malaysian students in my Chinese high school and adapting to the academic rigours of the University of Warwick have significantly shaped my intercultural competence, learning strategies, and self-identity. Hosting refined my skills as a cultural ambassador and facilitator; studying abroad tested and expanded my resilience, critical thinking, and adherence to scholarly conventions. Grounded in experiential and intercultural theory, this reflection demonstrates that personal growth emerges through **active participation, embracing discomfort, and continuous reflection**. As I advance, I carry forward these lessons, committed to fostering intercultural dialogue and academic excellence in all future endeavours.

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