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NEGOTIATING ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND METHODOLOGICAL LEARNING: AGENCY AMONG CHINESE DOCTORAL STUDENTS AT A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

Academic language and methodological learning are central to doctoral research, yet how they intersect in international students' everyday research practice and how students respond to related uncertainties remain underexplored. Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's temporal-relational conceptualisation of agency, this study presents a focused secondary analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews with Chinese doctoral students at a Malaysian public university. Mandarin transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that academic language became particularly consequential when students needed to understand supervisory reasoning, explain methodological choices, and translate feedback into research decisions. Methodological learning involved reassessing prior research practices and developing clearer connections among research questions, theory, methods, data, and analysis. Students responded to linguistic and methodological uncertainty by adjusting supervisory interactions and selectively mobilising peers, specialists, prior academic contacts, and technological resources. Agency was most evident in the reinterpretation of prior experience and practical judgments about present research demands, while future-oriented considerations appeared more selectively. The study shows how academic language and methodological learning become connected through research reasoning and conceptualises doctoral agency as temporally and relationally situated. The China–Malaysia case further highlights doctoral learning within an English-mediated South-South mobility context where host-university support may coexist with continuing academic relationships in China.

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Academic Language; Chinese Doctoral Students; Doctoral Learning; Malaysia; Methodological Learning; Student Agency



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Introduction

Chinese doctoral mobility to Malaysia has become increasingly visible within broader patterns of South-South student mobility, alongside Malaysia's growing role as a regional education hub and international study destination (Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Tham et al., 2013; Xu, Tran, et al., 2024). Research on Chinese students in Malaysian higher education has largely examined academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation (Xue & Singh, 2025), while more recent studies of Chinese doctoral students have addressed academic hierarchies, stigma, collective agency, employability, and supervisory relationships (Hu & Wang, 2024; Lu & Habil, 2024; Xu, Huang, et al., 2024; Xu, Tran, et al., 2024). Language has also been examined in relation to academic communication and supervision (Lu & Habil, 2024; Zhai & Razali, 2022). Yet less attention has been given to the everyday research practices through which Chinese doctoral students learn to conduct research after arrival, particularly how linguistic demands intersect with methodological reasoning and how students respond when uncertainty arises.

In doctoral education, academic language extends beyond general English proficiency because it is integral to understanding, discussing, and communicating research. Doctoral students use language to engage with literature, formulate research problems, interpret feedback, explain research decisions, and justify knowledge claims (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Wang & Li, 2011). Methodological learning is closely related, but it concerns developing reasoned connections among research questions, theoretical assumptions, research design, analysis, and evidence-based claims (Coronel Llamas & Boza, 2011; Earley, 2014). Studies of doctoral language have tended to focus on writing, feedback, and academic socialisation (Phyo et al., 2025; Yang, 2023), whereas methods education research has focused more on methodological understanding and research reasoning (Earley, 2014; Girard et al., 2025). This separation makes it less clear how language figures in methodological reasoning. In practice, students must understand and articulate the logic of research choices, particularly when interpreting feedback, discussing research design, explaining analysis, or justifying methodological decisions. At such moments, linguistic demands and methodological uncertainty may become closely connected. These moments of overlap also raise questions of doctoral agency. Students facing uncertainty may need to identify the problem, judge how to respond, and decide which relationships or resources might help. International student research has recognised students as active participants who interpret circumstances, mobilise resources, negotiate relationships, and shape their educational trajectories (Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2018). Less attention, however, has been given to how doctoral agency operates when linguistic and methodological uncertainties converge in everyday research practice. Reviews of international student and

doctoral research further call for closer attention to how agency is shaped by prior experience, present conditions, and anticipated futures (Inouye et al., 2023; Sun & Wu, 2024). Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal-relational conceptualisation of agency offers a useful framework by linking present action with past experience, current judgment, future possibilities, and the relationships through which action becomes possible.

Against this background, the study examines how academic language and methodological learning intersect in the everyday research practices of Chinese doctoral students at a Malaysian public university, and how students exercise agency when related uncertainties arise. The South-South setting brings together English-mediated doctoral work, doctoral supervision in Malaysia, broader academic norms, and, in some cases, relationships formed before mobility, providing a useful context for examining how linguistic and methodological demands are negotiated in doctoral research.

Literature Review

Academic Language and Methodological Learning in International Doctoral Education

Academic language is closely tied to the intellectual work of doctoral research. It is used not only in writing but also in reading, discussing ideas, interpreting feedback, and explaining research decisions. Studies of doctoral writing have therefore increasingly treated language development as part of disciplinary participation and research practice (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Yang (2023), for example, showed how supervisory feedback and reflection contributed to the development of both academic writing and researcher identity in an L2 doctoral context. Phyo et al. (2025) similarly found that international doctoral students developed their writing through sustained engagement with reading, writing, and feedback from academics and peers. Together, these studies show that academic language develops through continued participation in doctoral research.

Supervision is an important part of this process because research ideas and decisions are often discussed, questioned, and revised through interaction. In Malaysia, Bakar and Kumar (2025) found that supervisors supported L2 doctoral students' thesis and publication writing through feedback, discussion, mentoring, and guidance into academic communities. Research on Chinese doctoral students has also shown that language, communication style, and research culture can shape supervisory misunderstandings (Lu & Habil, 2024). These studies highlight the role of language in supervisory learning, but they pay less attention to how language is involved when students are learning to understand and justify methodological decisions.

Methodological learning involves more than mastering individual research techniques. It requires students to develop judgment about how research questions, theoretical positions, research design, evidence, and analysis fit together. Earley's (2014) synthesis of research methods education noted that relatively little attention had been paid to what students actually learn about research methods and how this learning develops. More recent work has placed greater emphasis on research reasoning as a gradual and dialogic process. Girard et al. (2025), for example, described the development of research questions as a process supported by dialogue, argumentation, and opportunities to explain and defend research choices. From this perspective, methodological learning involves learning how to make and justify coherent research decisions.

For international doctoral students, such learning may also involve reconsidering assumptions formed through previous educational and research experiences. Robinson-Pant (2009) showed that international doctoral students did not simply reproduce either home or host academic practices. They selectively retained, questioned, and revised earlier understandings as they encountered different expectations of research. Previous experience therefore remains important, but its meaning may change as students learn to work within new academic and methodological expectations.

Research on academic language and methodological learning has nevertheless tended to address these processes separately. Studies of doctoral language have mainly examined writing, feedback, supervision, and academic participation (Bakar & Kumar, 2025; Phyo et al., 2025; Yang, 2023), while research on methods education has focused more directly on methodological understanding and research reasoning (Earley, 2014; Girard et al., 2025). This division leaves an important part of doctoral learning less well explained. Methodological reasoning often has to be understood, discussed, and justified through language. Difficulties in interpreting methodological texts or supervisory feedback may therefore affect how students understand research design, while uncertainty about methods may make it harder to explain or defend research decisions. The literature provides limited explanation of how these processes come together in everyday doctoral research, especially for international students working across linguistic and educational contexts.

Agency in International Doctoral Learning

Research on international students has increasingly recognised agency as important for understanding how students respond to unfamiliar academic environments. Yet the concept has not always been used consistently. Inouye et al. (2023) found substantial variation in how agency was conceptualised across international student research, with some studies using the term without a clear theoretical account of how action develops. A similar issue appears in international doctoral education. Sun and Wu's (2024) systematic review found that doctoral agency was often treated as an incidental outcome or a relatively stable individual quality, leaving less attention to how previous experience and present conditions shape students' actions.

Recent empirical work has begun to address this limitation by showing that doctoral agency is shaped through relationships and context. Kuzhabekova and Kim (2026), for example, found that international doctoral students' actions developed through the interaction of personal, supervisory, peer, institutional, and mobility-related conditions. Such findings suggest that actions such as seeking advice, changing a research plan, or drawing on academic networks cannot be understood only as individual choices. Their meaning depends on the circumstances in which they occur and the resources available to students.

Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal-relational conceptualisation of agency offers a useful way to examine this process. Agency is understood through three interrelated temporal orientations. The iterational dimension concerns how past experiences are selectively recalled and reinterpreted; the practical-evaluative dimension concerns judgments made in response to present circumstances; and the projective dimension concerns orientations towards possible futures. These orientations may operate together within the same action. Their relational character is equally important, because students' judgments and responses develop through interactions with supervisors, peers, academic contacts, and other available resources.

This perspective is particularly useful for examining doctoral research uncertainty. Students may reconsider earlier research training, judge what a current methodological or linguistic difficulty requires, seek particular forms of support, and connect present learning with future research or professional goals. The same action, such as asking for help, may therefore reflect different processes depending on the student's prior experience, immediate concerns, and anticipated future. A temporal-relational account makes it possible to examine how responses to linguistic and methodological uncertainty take shape over the course of students' accounts, while remaining sensitive to the relationships and conditions that make particular actions possible.

Research Questions

The literature provides substantial insight into doctoral academic language, methodological learning, and international doctoral agency, but these bodies of research rarely meet at the level of everyday research practice. Less is understood about how academic language becomes involved in methodological reasoning as students learn to understand, explain, and revise research decisions. Existing work on doctoral agency also provides limited explanation of how students respond when linguistic and methodological uncertainties arise within this process. These gaps are particularly relevant to international doctoral education, where students may be working across linguistic, educational, and research traditions.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do academic language and methodological learning intersect in Chinese doctoral students' everyday research practice at a Malaysian public university?

RQ2: How do these doctoral students exercise agency in responding to linguistic and methodological uncertainties in everyday research practice?

Methodology

Research Design and Context

This study used a qualitative interview design within a Malaysian public university to examine how academic language and methodological learning intersect in Chinese doctoral students' everyday research practices and how students respond to related uncertainty. The university offered doctoral programmes across multiple disciplines. English was the principal language used for thesis writing and communication with supervisors. Participants also reported receiving formal research methods instruction, followed by further methodological learning through supervision and research practice.

The interviews were originally collected as part of a broader qualitative study of Chinese doctoral students' study experiences in Malaysia. The present study conducted a focused secondary analysis to address more specific questions concerning academic language, methodological learning, and responses to research uncertainty. Qualitative secondary analysis is appropriate when existing data are sufficiently rich and closely aligned with new research questions, particularly when the new analysis develops issues present in the original dataset but not fully examined in the primary study (Heaton, 2008; Hinds et al., 1997; Tate & Happ, 2018). The original interviews contained detailed accounts of academic communication, supervision, research development, methodological learning, and responses to research difficulties, and were therefore closely aligned with the present questions. In addition, the first

author conducted the original interviews and retained familiarity with the participants and the interview context. These conditions supported a focused re-examination of the data while preserving the context in which participants' accounts were produced (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019).

Participants and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling. Eligibility required Chinese nationality and current enrolment in a doctoral programme at the university. Twelve students participated, representing a range of disciplinary backgrounds and stages of candidature from the first to the third year. All interviews were conducted by the first author between July and August 2025. The 12 interviews provided a focused and information-rich dataset for the present analysis. All participants had direct experience of the academic and research processes addressed by the study, while variation in disciplinary background and stage of candidature brought different doctoral experiences within the shared institutional setting. The interviews also generated detailed accounts of academic communication, supervision, methodological learning, research difficulties, and research decisions. These features contributed to the information power of the dataset. In qualitative interview research, sample adequacy is shaped by the focus of the study, the specificity and relevance of participants' experiences, the quality of the data, and the analytical approach (Malterud et al., 2016). This assessment is also consistent with recommendations that qualitative sample size should be justified in relation to the characteristics and informational value of the dataset (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

The original dataset comprised 12 semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face or online according to participants' availability and preference. Interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent. The broader interview guide explored academic reading and writing, communication with supervisors, research development, methodological learning, prior educational and research experience, responses to academic difficulty, and future academic plans. Follow-up questions encouraged participants to elaborate on particular research experiences, difficulties, and decisions.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, a shared first language of the interviewer and participants, and were transcribed verbatim in Chinese. The Chinese transcripts remained the primary dataset throughout the analysis. Retaining the original language during analysis was intended to minimise the potential loss of contextual and conceptual meaning that can occur when qualitative data are translated before interpretation (Squires, 2008; van Nes et al., 2010). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee before recruitment. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained before the interviews, and identifying information was removed or generalised in reporting. Quotations are attributed only to participant codes, and only participant characteristics needed for contextual interpretation are reported in Table 1, which reduces the risk of indirect identification in this small institutional sample. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Information (N=12)

Participant	Gender	Disciplinary Background	Stage of Candidature
P1	Female	Cultural Heritage	Third year
P2	Female	Business Administration	Third year
P3	Female	Education	Second year
P4	Male	Entrepreneurship Education	Second year
P5	Male	Architecture and Human Living Environment	First year
P6	Male	Marketing	Third year
P7	Female	Language and Education Studies	Second year
P8	Female	Accounting	Second year
P9	Male	Fashion Design	Third year
P10	Female	Visual Communication	Third year
P11	Male	Linguistics	Third year
P12	Male	Art and Design	First year

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), following Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024). Consistent with an interpretive orientation, participants' accounts were treated as situated understandings of their doctoral experiences, with researcher interpretation forming part of theme development. RTA was selected because it enables patterned meanings to be developed across qualitative accounts without relying on coding consensus or treating themes as objectively discoverable entities (Braun & Clarke, 2021). All 12 transcripts were reread in full for the present analysis. Coding categories and themes from the broader study were not carried into the present analysis. Initial coding remained relatively close to participants' accounts and focused on academic communication, methodological learning, changes in research understanding, supervisory interaction, uncertainty, relationships, and resource use. Coding and theme development were recursive, involving repeated movement between coded extracts, complete transcripts, analytic notes, and the research questions.

Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal-relational framework was introduced after the initial experiential patterns had been developed. Initial coding preceded the use of the framework, and its iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative orientations subsequently served as sensitising concepts for interpreting agency within and across the themes. The analysis examined how participants reinterpreted prior experience, made judgments under present conditions, and, where evident, connected current learning to future possibilities. The three temporal orientations were not treated as fixed coding categories or mapped directly onto individual themes. Because the interviews were cross-sectional and retrospective, the analysis focused on how participants linked past experience, present conditions, and future possibilities within their accounts.

The first author led coding and theme development, while emerging interpretations were discussed with the other researchers. These discussions were used to challenge assumptions and prompt renewed engagement with the Chinese transcripts, consistent with the reflexive principles of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024).

Reflexivity and Translation

The first author was also an international student at the university and knew some participants before the study, but held no teaching, supervisory, assessment, or administrative authority over them. This partial insider position supported familiarity with the research setting while requiring continued attention to assumptions arising from that familiarity (Berger, 2015). The first author maintained reflexive notes during analysis to document emerging interpretations, analytical decisions, and assumptions associated with their partial insider position. Candidate themes were repeatedly checked against the complete Chinese transcripts, and alternative interpretations raised within the research team prompted further examination of the original data. Meanwhile, translation into English occurred after the themes had been developed in Chinese. A bilingual researcher translated and checked the quotations selected for publication against the original Chinese extracts, with attention to conceptual and contextual equivalence. This procedure recognises translation as an interpretive component of cross-language qualitative research and reflects the importance of transparency in reporting translation procedures, particularly where meaning may shift across languages (Squires, 2008; van Nes et al., 2010).

Findings

Three interrelated themes were developed from the interview data: academic language in research reasoning, reworking familiar ways of doing research, and mobilising resources to address research uncertainty. Together, the themes capture different parts of the same learning process. The first shows where academic language and methodological learning intersect most directly, especially when students need to understand or articulate research reasoning. The second shows how methodological learning also develops through the reworking of prior research practices, including moments where language is less central. The third focuses on how students act on linguistic and methodological uncertainty by mobilising relational resources. Across the themes, agency was most visible in participants' reinterpretation of prior experience and judgments about present research demands. Future-oriented considerations were present but less consistently shown to shape immediate action. Iterational and practical-evaluative orientations cut across the themes, while projective orientations appeared more selectively.

Academic Language in Research Reasoning

Participants described language as a continuing feature of doctoral study, but its significance extended beyond general English proficiency. Language became especially consequential when students needed to follow supervisory reasoning, explain methodological decisions, or participate in conceptually demanding discussions. The main difficulty lay in accessing and articulating the reasoning through which research decisions were made.

P9 illustrated this distinction most clearly:

"Language was still the biggest barrier in my communication with my supervisor. I found academic discussions difficult to keep up with, and I sometimes failed to grasp the reasoning behind his explanations. That meant I left meetings without complete clarity and had to spend time working out what he intended, occasionally taking the wrong direction as a result." (P9)

For P9, incomplete linguistic understanding affected how he interpreted what needed to be revised and, at times, the direction of his research. Academic language mattered because it

mediated access to the reasoning through which methodological and analytical decisions were explained.

P11 made a related distinction between being able to conduct research and being able to discuss it in academic English:

“When I started the PhD, I felt confident. I thought it would be manageable, given my experience in teaching and research in China. Later, I realised that doing research and discussing it in English were not the same thing. The research itself was not difficult for me but expressing and explaining it remained challenging.” (P11)

For him, language became more demanding as the project moved into data analysis and more complex argumentation. He occasionally used translation assistance to check his understanding of supervisory guidance. This suggests that the salience of linguistic difficulty varied across research stages; it became more consequential when students needed conceptual precision or had to explain the reasoning behind analytical choices.

Language shaped both comprehension and participation. P10 described being unable to express her ideas as freely as she wished when speaking with lecturers and her supervisor. Her account indicates that academic language influenced how readily students could question, elaborate, and defend their own research thinking. In this sense, language formed part of participation in doctoral knowledge production.

For some participants, however, methodological difficulty remained largely separate from language. P1, for example, described unfamiliar research approaches as a major challenge while reporting few substantial difficulties in communicating with her supervisor. Across these accounts, academic language and methodological learning intersected when students needed to understand or articulate research reasoning. The overlap was selective. Language became particularly consequential at points where doctoral communication carried methodological or analytical meaning.

Reworking Familiar Ways of Doing Research

Methodological learning often involved reconsidering research practices that participants had previously regarded as familiar or sufficient. Students entered doctoral study with different levels of prior experience, and current doctoral demands prompted them to reassess earlier assumptions about how research should be designed, conducted, and justified.

For participants with limited experience of particular approaches, this reassessment could begin with considerable uncertainty. P3 had paid little attention to quantitative research before the doctorate and had rarely used it in her previous work:

“I had paid very little attention to quantitative research before and had hardly ever used it. When my supervisor said I should use this method, I felt very afraid because I didn’t know where to start. At one point, I even asked whether I could use a purely qualitative approach because quantitative research felt very difficult to me.” (P3)

P3 initially considered returning to the qualitative approach with which she was more familiar. As she continued with the mixed-methods design, however, she expanded her reading of

quantitative studies, consulted academic contacts, reconsidered variables, and learned more about scales, moderation, and mediation. This process also changed how she read quantitative research:

“Before, I basically did not look at the quantitative part; sometimes I only looked at the conclusion. Now I can understand the quantitative part.” (P3)

Her account illustrates how methodological uncertainty could lead to an expansion of methodological repertoire. A form of research that initially appeared difficult and unfamiliar gradually became something she could understand and begin to apply in her own study.

Other participants similarly re-evaluated their prior preparation in light of current doctoral demands. P8 described her previous research foundation as “very weak” and identified quantitative models and methodology as areas requiring further learning. P1 reflected that the research approaches developed through her earlier undergraduate and master’s education had been insufficiently mature and felt that doctoral study had subsequently “enriched and deepened” her overall approach to theoretical research. P12 recalled initially being uncertain about literature searching, source use, and methodological requirements, but later felt that he had at least come to “know the direction” through supervisory guidance, peer support, and continued self-learning. P9 also described a gradual shift towards a more connected understanding of research background, research problems, gaps, theory, methods, and data.

Across these accounts, participants selectively questioned and revised what they already knew. Prior research experience provided a reference point from which current doctoral demands were interpreted. Methodological learning involved developing stronger connections among research questions, literature, theory, design, analysis, and evidence-based claims. This process could occur when language was less central, although linguistic and methodological demands became connected when unfamiliar research reasoning had to be understood, discussed, or justified through academic interaction.

Some participants also connected current learning with anticipated future research. P11 felt that the “logical way of academic thinking” developed during doctoral study would support his future research direction and methods, while P3 began to consider how quantitative approaches and methodological collaboration might inform later research. These future orientations were present, though participants’ reinterpretation of prior experience and responses to present research demands were more consistently visible across the accounts.

Mobilising Resources to Address Research Uncertainty

Participants negotiated linguistic and methodological uncertainty through both individual effort and relational resources. They drew on supervisors, peers, disciplinary specialists, previous academic contacts, and technological tools. The key issue was how students recognised uncertainty, judged what kind of support might be useful, and decided how to mobilise it.

P9 described group supervision as a setting in which peers helped interpret what had not been fully understood: “If I didn’t understand something, someone would explain it to me... We reminded each other.” Peer interaction provided an additional interpretive layer through which supervisory guidance could be clarified.

P7 showed a different form of relational agency. After receiving advice from a friend, she changed how she presented uncertainty to her supervisor:

"I accepted a friend's advice and tried to change the way I talked with my supervisor. I started to tell him directly where my confusion was, instead of just describing what I planned to do. I would tell him that I did not know how to do something, or that I thought there might be a problem, and then ask for his opinion. (P7)

The significance of this shift lay in how she made the problem more visible within the supervisory relationship. By reformulating her uncertainty, P7 altered the interaction in a way that made guidance more usable.

Participants also sought expertise beyond immediate supervision when necessary. P4 contacted specialists and professors in his field when his supervisor's expertise only partially overlapped with his topic. P3 drew on academic contacts in China while reconsidering data collection and analysis and subsequently revised her research plan. These examples show that pre-mobility academic relationships could remain part of students' research networks after arrival alongside host-university resources. Translation tools were also used occasionally to check linguistic understanding and supplemented academic interaction.

Across these cases, resource mobilisation rarely produced an immediate solution. More often, it created opportunities for further clarification, comparison, or revision. Agency was therefore relationally enacted and practically situated. Participants first had to recognise that something remained unresolved, identify what kind of support might be relevant, and decide how particular people or tools could be used.

Taken together, the three themes answer the research questions in complementary ways. In relation to RQ1, academic language and methodological learning intersected most clearly when participants needed to understand, explain, or revise research reasoning, especially in supervision, feedback, and methodological discussion. The intersection was selective: methodological learning also developed through the re-evaluation of prior research practices when language was less central. In relation to RQ2, agency was expressed through different temporal emphases across these situations. Practical-evaluative agency was visible when participants diagnosed what they did not understand and decided how to respond. Iterational agency appeared as they reinterpreted and selectively revised prior research practices in light of present doctoral demands. The relational character of agency was visible in decisions about how to use supervisors, peers, specialists, prior academic contacts, and technological resources. Projective orientations appeared where some participants connected current learning to future research or academic possibilities, but they were less consistently shown to direct immediate action. Across the accounts, doctoral agency emerged as a temporally and relationally situated process through which students navigated uncertainty and moved their research forward.

Discussion

The findings show that academic language became particularly important when students needed to understand and explain research reasoning. Participants did not experience language difficulty in the same way throughout their doctorate. Its influence became more visible during supervision, methodological discussion, and data analysis, when students had to understand why a particular research decision was needed and how it should be carried out. This is

consistent with research that views doctoral language and writing as part of research practice rather than as separate language skills (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Cotterall, 2011; Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2020). It also relates to studies showing that supervisory feedback requires students to interpret comments in relation to their own developing research (Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Wang & Li, 2011). The present findings suggest that understanding the words used in supervision does not always lead to a clear understanding of the research reasoning behind them. This helps explain why some participants could communicate with their supervisors reasonably well but still struggled with methodological decisions, while others found language more difficult when research discussions became conceptually demanding. Academic language therefore became most important when it was closely connected with research reasoning.

Methodological learning developed through participants' reconsideration of their previous research experience. Several participants entered the doctorate with research habits or methodological preferences formed during earlier study. As doctoral work progressed, they began to reassess these earlier practices. Some realised that their previous research preparation was limited, while others encountered methods that they had rarely used before. Their learning involved developing clearer connections between research questions, literature, theory, methods, data, and analysis. This is consistent with research showing that learning research methods involves more than mastering procedures (Coronel Llamas & Boza, 2011; Earley, 2014). The findings show that prior experience continued to influence how students approached new methodological demands. Students used what they already knew as a reference point and gradually revised or expanded it in response to current research needs. This process also helps explain the differences across participants. Their methodological difficulties varied because their earlier training and research experience differed. Doctoral learning therefore involved an ongoing process of reviewing, adjusting, and extending prior ways of doing research.

Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal-relational theory of agency helps explain how students moved from uncertainty to action during this process. The three themes identified in the findings do not correspond directly to the three temporal orientations of agency. The orientations appeared across the themes and could occur together in the same research experience. The iterational orientation was visible when participants drew on earlier education and research experience to make sense of current difficulties. The practical-evaluative orientation appeared when they judged what was unclear and decided what to do next. For example, a student might recognise that a familiar research approach was no longer sufficient and then decide whether to revise the design, seek methodological advice, or discuss the problem differently with a supervisor. Projective orientations appeared when some participants linked their current learning with future publication, research, or academic work. These future considerations were present, although they were less closely connected with immediate research decisions in the interview accounts. The temporal-relational perspective therefore helps explain agency as a process that develops through connections between previous experience, present problems, and possible future directions. It gives greater attention to how students arrive at particular actions in specific research situations.

Relationships were also central to these actions. Participants drew on supervisors, peers, academic specialists, contacts in China, university resources, and technological tools when they encountered research uncertainty. Their responses varied according to the problem they were trying to solve. P7 changed the way she explained her uncertainty to her supervisor so that she could receive more useful guidance. P3 sought support from an academic contact in China when she needed more specialised knowledge of quantitative research. P4 used different

sources for language development, disciplinary knowledge, and methodological advice. These findings are consistent with relational approaches to international student agency (Inouye et al., 2023; Tran & Vu, 2018) and with research that views doctoral agency as dynamic and situated (Sun & Wu, 2024). They also show that doctoral independence can involve knowing when additional expertise is needed and how to access it. Students exercised agency through the decisions they made about whom to approach, what kind of support to seek, and how to use that support in their research.

The China-Malaysia context adds another layer to these findings. Research on Chinese international doctoral students has often focused on study in Western and Anglophone countries. The participants in this study also conducted doctoral work through English, but they were studying at a Malaysian public university within a South-South mobility context. Their research experience brought together English-medium doctoral work, Malaysian supervision, international academic expectations, and, for some participants, continuing academic relationships in China. This combination shows that English-medium doctoral learning can also take place within a non-Western destination. It also shows that students may continue to use academic resources from China after mobility. Contacts developed before studying abroad could become useful again when students needed particular disciplinary or methodological expertise. Existing research on Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia has examined academic hierarchy, degree recognition, collective agency, and employability (Hu & Wang, 2024; Xu, Huang, et al., 2024; Xu, Tran, et al., 2024). The present study brings attention to another part of the experience: the everyday process of learning how to conduct doctoral research after arrival. Within this setting, students' academic learning developed through connections among previous experience, host-university supervision, and wider academic resources. The China-Malaysia case therefore offers a useful South-South perspective on how academic language, methodological learning, and doctoral agency can develop together in international doctoral education.

Conclusion

This study examined how academic language and methodological learning intersected in the everyday research practice of Chinese doctoral students at a Malaysian public university and how students exercised agency in responding to linguistic and methodological uncertainties. The findings show that the two domains became most closely connected when participants needed to interpret supervisory reasoning, explain methodological choices, or translate feedback into research decisions. Methodological learning also involved reassessing and selectively revising prior ways of doing research, including situations in which language was less central. Agency was most clearly evident in how participants reinterpreted previous experience, made situated judgments about present research demands, and mobilised relational resources to move their research forward.

The study contributes to international doctoral education by showing how academic language and methodological learning became connected at specific moments of research reasoning and decision-making. It also shows the value of understanding agency as temporally and relationally situated. Participants drew on prior experience, made judgments about current research problems, and, more selectively, connected current learning with future research or academic possibilities. Within this bounded China–Malaysia case, doctoral learning took place through English-mediated academic work, Malaysian supervision, and, for some participants, continuing academic relationships in China. These findings highlight how doctoral learning

and agency can develop across relationships and resources that extend across pre- and post-mobility contexts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Drawing on retrospective interviews with 12 Chinese doctoral students at a single Malaysian public university, the findings provide contextually grounded insights into a bounded institutional setting. Their transferability should therefore be considered in relation to similar institutional and mobility contexts. Because the interviews were originally generated for a broader study, the present focused analysis relies on participants' retrospective accounts of linguistic and methodological learning rather than data collected specifically to trace these processes over time.

The study did not comparatively examine disciplinary differences or stages of candidature, and its cross-sectional design could not capture how academic language, methodological learning, and agency changed across the doctorate. The analysis also centred on students' perspectives, while the views and interactions of supervisors, peers, and other academic actors were not independently examined. Future research could use longitudinal and multi-perspective designs to follow how linguistic and methodological uncertainties develop across different stages of doctoral research. Comparative work across institutions and mobility contexts could also examine how the forms of agency identified here vary under different supervisory, disciplinary, and institutional conditions.

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