

Chinese study mothers' English language learning experiences in Australia during COVID-19

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In an era of internationalisation, an increasing number of Chinese parents as caregivers accompanied their children (<18 years) to study in Australian primary and secondary schools. The other parent of the family remained in China to provide financial support. These accompanying parents are generally called 'study parents'. In Australia, the study parents' visa regulations restrict them from undertaking paid work and limit their study of English language courses to 20 hours per week and no more than three months in a formal classroom context. The impact of COVID-19 has tempered contemporary notions of internationalisation. In 2020, during the spread of the global COVID-19 pandemic, these sojourner parents were located away from their local communities, living within an Australian context.

During this period, I conducted a qualitative study that aimed to generate knowledge about six Chinese study mothers' transnational experiences in Australia. In particular, how they invested in English in their daily lives when their language learning opportunities were restricted by their visa type and affected by the pandemic. These women were learning English at Having-fun Club (a pseudonym) in Melbourne, Australia before the pandemic. This site is a not-for-profit English language community school situated in a southeast suburb of Melbourne, which aims to provide support and create an inclusive as well as friendly environment for migrants to Australia. I recruited the participants for this study through this club.

During COVID-19, to avoid any physical contact, the participation in the English classes provided by this Club went online. Preliminary findings from thematic analysis suggest that the transitory circumstances increased feelings of uncertainty among these study parents, particularly about their future plans in terms of whether they should continue living in Australia or return to China. The interview data shows that these women's different desires for learning English helped to guide and shape their practices to learn the language in the target society during these times. Although for most of the mothers, mastering English was not considered a 'must' to live in Australia, they believed that their understanding of some basic communicative English could help them to better adapt to the target community and to accumulate different types of capital for their families, enabling them to better take care of their children in this transnational context. The Chinese study mothers took-up opportunities, such as the Chinese community-based free online Having-fun Club English classes and the use of different mobile applications or YouTube, to learn English in Australia.

This research calls for an inclusion of Chinese study parents in Australia's adult English language learning programs to provide more opportunities for language learning experiences, particularly for adult migrants as transient sojourners living in a transnational context with rapidly changing conditions and emerging challenges.