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Can online pre-sessional courses be transformative learning opportunities for international student interns?

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Abstract

As more UK higher education institutions (HEI) reach for blended or online learning solutions, the ways students develop and build relationships in the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classroom have changed. One way that universities have tried to support pre-sessional students in this new learning context is by employing student interns to assist teachers in the online environment to help students prepare for life in the UK. Although this may be a pragmatic approach by institutions, there has been limited research around the intern's experience and how they develop through this process. This explorative study investigates the experiences of international student interns and the extent they experienced transformative learning while working on an online pre-sessional course at a teaching focused university in the UK. The data collected consists of semi-structured interviews with the four interns at the end of the course. It seems that all four research participants experienced some form of transformative learning. Three key areas were identified in the research: patience and communication skills in the online environment, dealing with culture and identity, and workplace practices. Evidence suggests that a unique combination of factors in the virtual learning environment contributed to disorienting situations that allowed the international student interns to alter their point of view. Further study is needed around the role of transformative learning in the online classroom.

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1. Introduction

As more UK higher education institutions (HEI) reach for blended or online learning solutions, the way students learn and build relationships in the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classroom is dramatically changing. Despite the changes in approach, the purpose of these courses is still the same. EAP courses in the UK are designed to help prepare non-English speaking international students for study on undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses.

At my institution, we offer both face-to-face and online pre-sessional EAP courses. Summer pre-sessionals normally run from 6 to 14 weeks, with the length of attendance depending on the amount of language support the student needs. For instance, weaker students who need more support would likely be expected to attend for the full 14 weeks, whereas students who are primarily lacking academic skills may only need to attend for 6 weeks. At the end of the course, all students must pass a series of high stakes assessments in reading, writing, speaking and listening to show that they have the appropriate language and academic skills needed to study successfully on their degree course. The minimum level needed to access our university degree programmes is B2 on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) or 6.0 IELTS (International English Language Testing System) with no language component below 5.5. However, this is a baseline, and the required language level can vary depending on the level of study and the degree subject.

The majority of our pre-sessional students come from mainland China, although we do have some students from the Middle East and other parts of Asia. In recent years, there has been an increase in students enrolled on the courses with somewhat limited English language proficiency, many joining the programme with an IELTS score of less than 5 in one or more components. These students normally need a lot of support and opportunities to practice their language skills if they are to achieve an IELTS 6.0 by the end of the summer.

In addition to language skills, the institution includes aspects of cultural awareness in the curriculum to help students build confidence and better adjust to life in the UK and their new university culture. One way this can be supported is by helping students develop good relationships with other new and existing students at the university. In a face-to-face course, a student's involvement with in-person clubs and recreational activities can help a new cohort bridge the gap and make the transition less daunting (Zerengok, 2018). However, as there were still some Covid restrictions in China at this time, all our pre-sessional programmes were being taught online. That meant that our students were attending virtually from their home countries, with many having limited access to teachers and classmates, and few opportunities to meet new students and speak English outside the online classroom.

From the previous year, we noted that some students struggled to build relationships or develop the essential language needed to be successful in the online environment due to technical difficulties, problems understanding the material and general issues around communication (Erlangga, 2022). Building on the previous course design, the course leaders decided to use a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning sessions. These included collaborative learning tasks, or what we referred to as student-regulated peer group sessions. Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2017) highlighted that this type of learning should ideally be interactive and engaging, using multimodal learning to support all types of learners. However, in many instances, it is often reduced to online forums and discussions around the readings. Due to the skills that our students needed to develop over a short period, it was not believed that the latter interpretation would contribute to a supportive environment where students could share ideas, discuss different perspectives and reflect critically (Jurkova & Guo, 2018; Ritz, 2010). It was suggested that the students would need additional help and encouragement if they were to successfully engage in interactive activities. The course leaders also acknowledged concerns around "immediacy and responsiveness" that needed to be dealt with if we were to create a dynamic online learning space (Burke and Larmar, 2021, p. 607). McBrien, Cheng & Jones (2019) have pointed out that technical issues can have a negative impact on the student experience so we wanted to make sure that support was in place to deal with any problems that might arise.

Over the years we have had some success with volunteers working with learners in the face-to-face classroom, so the course team decided that one way we could support the pre-sessional students was by employing student interns that could assist the teachers and learners in the online environment. To maximise learner efficacy, four interns were hired to act as virtual teaching assistants. These interns were either international students who were graduating over the summer or were currently enrolled in a degree programme at the university (see Table 1). They worked roughly 20 hours per week for 14 weeks. All were from mainland China, spoke English as a second language and were currently living in the UK. These students were not specifically chosen because they were Chinese, but rather they happened to be

the students who applied for the positions. Some of them had been involved with the department previously or had attended the pre-sessional themselves when they first came to the university, so they were aware of our programmes. Their English levels ranged from B2 to C1 on the CEFR.

All interns attended induction training before the start of the course and were supported by the course leadership team throughout the pre-sessional. In addition to working with the teachers, the teaching team believed that the interns could share their experiences of university and act as role models for the pre-sessional students. The hope was that this could help mitigate the lack of face-to-face interaction, and help the learners better assimilate into UK Higher Education (HE). In many ways, their role was similar to a volunteer in our face-to-face classes. However, this was a paid position that involved a higher level of skill and commitment. Unlike our volunteers, they were expected to work set hours each day and organise and run peer group sessions without supervision.

The interns were responsible for training the students in the use of Microsoft Teams and other software, providing tech support for the teachers (and students) and facilitating the collaborative learning sessions. Castelli & Sarvary's (2020) research highlighted the benefits of using teaching assistants to monitor the online chats, and we hoped to take advantage of this as our numbers were high for an English language class, with 17-18 students in each online group. The interns spent much of their working day communicating with the pre-sessional students and acting as problem solvers. Without prompting, they took extra care explaining cultural differences to the students on the programme. Some of this was even done outside of class in their own time. This appeared to be quite beneficial for the students, especially the Chinese learners as they had a common reference point. They also took it upon themselves to help the weaker learners who were struggling with academic skills. One of the interns even tried to teach the students English outside of the lessons. Nevertheless, the interns were not employed as English Language teachers or expected to work beyond their contracted hours.

At the end of the course, we collected feedback from the students, teachers and interns on ways to improve the course for the following year. However, we did not collect any data on the interns' experience and their perceptions of the online pre-sessional as a vehicle for their own learning and development. Over the course, it was noted that they seemed to evolve and grow. The interns initiated off-the-cuff discussions that seemed to revolve around reevaluating the assumptions they held. The interns were becoming more independent; they were developing confidence and starting to speak with a sense of authority. This was especially true for the undergraduate interns who had been with us for the full 14 weeks.

The interns' development piqued my curiosity having been an international student myself and a language teacher. I questioned if the challenges they faced in the online environment combined with their dual identity as both international student and facilitator contributed to this sense of responsibility and industriousness. Their relationship with the pre-sessional students seemed complex, and they were generally concerned about the learners they supported. I wondered if the interns possibly saw themselves in the pre-sessional students as they understood what it was like to be a new student studying in UK HE.

There has been limited research on intern experiences and how they develop while working in virtual learning environments. Employing interns may have been a pragmatic approach by the institution and useful for the pre-sessional students, however, it may also hold significant benefits for the interns which need to be further explored. Therefore, this explorative study investigates the experiences of international student interns and the extent to which they experienced transformative learning while working on an online pre-sessional course at a teaching-focused university in the UK.

In this paper, the international student interns will be referred to as interns so that they are not confused with the international students attending the pre-sessional courses.

2. Theoretical framework

Transformative learning was first identified by Mezirow while conducting qualitative research on mature female students returning to Higher Education in the US in the 1970s (Kumi-Yeboah, 2010). It views learning from a constructivist perspective and is based on the underlying assumption that for learning to take place, learners need to interpret and reinterpret their experiences (Mezirow, 1994). It is defined by Mezirow and Cranton (2012, p. 76) as the process by:

> which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference … to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

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This frame of reference is associated with two primary components, the habits of mind and points of view, which can "lead to a perspective transformation" (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 107). Mezirow (1997, p. 6) described the habits of mind as a "broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes". These codes are associated with ideas surrounding culture, society and politics. Points of view are a result of habits of mind and are viewed as "the constellation of beliefs, value judgment, attitude, and feelings that shape a particular interpretation" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). Unlike habits of mind which lacks flexibility, point of view is more open to modification and change and is often associated with problem-solving skills in adults. It is also more accepting of feedback from experiences and other people's perspectives. Moreover, it is believed that adults can learn by responding to challenges or what Mezirow and Cranton (2012) refer to as disorienting dilemmas. These dilemmas occur when assumptions and expectations do not align with a new experience (Mezirow, 1991). Faulk and Morris's (2012) research on transformative learning in nursing education defines three primary transformative learning approaches: critical reflection, critical self-reflection and dialogue. With transformative learning theory, it is argued that activities such as critical discussion and critical reflection can impact points of view and ultimately lead to social and individual change (Jurkova and Guo, 2018).

Though many benefits of the theory have been highlighted, transformative learning is not without criticism. For instance, Taylor (2007, p. 176) points out that the role of culture is not clearly understood and that it is difficult to distinguish between "what is related to transformative learning and what is a product of normal development of the individual and/or socio-cultural change within society". It is also believed that factors such as personality, cultural background and previous experiences of learning can impact transformative learning in international students (Ritz, 2010). Despite this, there has been little research into the extent to which these aspects impact international students' transformative learning (Taylor, 2007). No research has been conducted on how students with overlapping identities as staff and learners develop in the online learning environment. It has been argued that transformative learning is not confined to the classroom and that adults may experience this outside educational establishments when dealing with challenges such as immigration, social, cultural and financial issues (Tisdell, 2000; King, 1997; Cranton, 1994). In the context of this current study, all the interns were living in the UK, and it could be difficult to distinguish between transformative learning experienced during everyday life and that which happened with the interns on the online pre-sessional course.

An overview of the literature (Ruales et al., 2021; Lee, 2020; Forte & Blouin, 2016) shows a link between transformative learning and the online learning context. Evidence suggests that the digital environment lends itself to this type learning as it has the potential to change the teacher's role from lecturer to facilitator (Lund & Smørdal, 2006) and create opportunities for critical reflection and discussion (Huang, 2002). Despite this, there has been limited research on interns and transformative learning in the online environment.

3. Research questions

- *Research question 1*: What were the experiences of the international student interns working on the online pre-sessional course?
- *Research question 2*: To what extent did the interns experience transformative learning while working on the online pre-sessional course?

4. Research participants

Four interns working on the summer online pre-sessional course were interviewed in this study (Table 1). The interns were all from China and interviews ranged in length from 30-60 minutes.

Table 1. Research participants

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Level of study	Area of study
Intern 1	Chinese	Female	PhD student	Art and Media
Intern 2	Chinese	Female	3rd Year undergraduate student (graduating) - starting MA in September	International Business Communication
Intern 3	Chinese	Male	3rd Year undergraduate student (graduating)	Business
Intern 4	Chinese	Male	2nd year undergraduate student (going to 3rd year)	Medicine

5. Methodological considerations

One of the aims of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the interns' lived experiences, so I decided that interviews could work well considering the research questions and the working relationship I had with the participants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to ensure that the four participants had a similar set of basic questions that allowed the more talkative participants to share their thoughts and opinions (Panke, 2018). My institution's ethics procedures were followed, and I gained informed consent prior to the interviews. The semi-structured interview questions were emailed to the interns in advance so that they had plenty of time to think about the questions and prepare for our session. The consent document clearly stated that the interviews would be video recorded using Microsoft Teams, transcribed and then saved in a password-protected secure location. It was also made clear that the participants had the right to withdraw from the research.

Koulouriotis (2011) points out that there could be ethical considerations surrounding non-native speakers, so I took care to ensure that the participants understood what was involved in the research. Due to cultural differences and my role in managing the pre-sessional course, I was aware that the interns may feel pressured to take part in the study. Also, the interviewees would inevitably be discussing things that I had been involved in, and although they were not commenting on the running of the course, the decisions I made and the way I had engaged with the interns during the pre-sessional would have affected their experiences and feeling about the programme. I was aware that because of this it was impossible to separate me from the data. Throughout this interview process, I tried to be mindful of the "personal and social positionings" of the research participants and me, as the researcher (Roulston & Shelton, 2015, p. 338), and how this could influence our interaction and my interpretation of the data.

An added concern was that despite all the participants being competent speakers of English, none of the interviewees spoke English as their first language, so I wanted to ensure that no vital data was lost, or questions misinterpreted due to English language proficiency. This could be compounded by the fact that as colleagues, the participants could feel that we had a shared experience and inadvertently leave out key information (Drever, 1995). To pre-empt this, I tried to predict topics that might arise in advance. I reviewed the Microsoft Teams correspondences from the summer and highlighted any concerns that the interns had raised in team meetings. Panke (2018) highlights the need for triangulation when conducting interviews, so I used my notes from the course and the literature alongside the interviews. During the interview, I made sure to repeat and rephrase questions and probe for additional information as we went along.

6. Data analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data set. After each interview, I began reviewing the transcripts and highlighting loose themes noted by each interviewee. I would later identify specific themes, but at this early stage I was trying to establish a relationship with the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Once this was complete, I reviewed the data and generated codes that would be used to code the semi-structured interviews. The coded data was then reviewed, and I looked for overlapping and/or clustered codes that could eventually be the basis of themes. This was a back-and-forth process that needed to be repeatedly evaluated, especially as some of the codes crossed over more than one theme. For instance, technology was interwoven throughout all the themes, so this needed revisiting and further probing. Finally, themes were then constructed using the inductive codes in Table 2.

Once the analysis was complete, I grouped my results into three key areas that I address in the Findings and Discussion section.

Table 2. Themes and inductive codes

Themes	Inductive Codes
Patience and Communication Skills in the Online Environment	Arbitration Communication skills (communicating effectively) English language skills Patience Technology
Dealing with Culture and Identity	Confidence and self-esteem Culture Identity
Workplace Practices	Teamwork Time management Working with different stakeholders

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7. Findings and discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the international student interns' experiences and to investigate the extent that the interns experienced transformative learning while working on the online pre-sessional programme. This section will discuss the findings from the semi-structured interviews. The finds from RQ1 have been grouped into three thematic sections.

7.1 RQ1: What were the experiences of the international student interns working on the online pre-sessional course?

7.1.1 Patience and communication skills in the online environment

Much of the data from the interview participants focused on communication and the ability to communicate clearly to the online pre-sessional students as well as the way individual behaviour can affect others. All participants noted that communication with the students was particularly challenging during the synchronous sessions as student questions and comments were not always forthcoming, and there was a lack of non-verbal cues as cameras were frequently turned off (Castelli & Sarvary, 2020).

This meant that the interns were frequently contacted after the session to answer questions and clarify expectations, but also to help the students communicate with each other and arbitrate differences. Both undergraduate and postgraduate interns noted that they had developed patience while working on the online pre-sessional. Issues with technology and the software used were ongoing throughout the course and could be challenging at times. One intern stated that some of the students struggled with basic digital literacy skills, which the intern found difficult. The interns explained that supporting these learners was time consuming, especially as many had low levels of spoken English, and some did not speak Chinese so there was no possibility of switching to a different language. These types of situations put the interns in positions where they had to critically reassess the assumptions they hold about the kind of learners that attend university and the skills needed to be successful.

> So, there was one student that both me and the lecturer were really worried about. She was a postgraduate student, and she had no experience in technology whatsoever. She... She even asked us this question if she can hand write the essay because she is not familiar with typing. So, it's like, oh my god, this is going to be fun. Um, so yeah, we.... she just encountered so many problems with like.... she's just not really familiarised with technology at all. (Intern 4)

The intern also described a situation where they had to act as a mediator between students who were struggling to communicate with each other. Most of the research participants felt this would have been easier to mitigate in an in-person learning environment.

> There were a couple issues with the Chinese and non-Chinese students in in my group. So, I think they were two Indian students with two Chinese students, and they do not understand each other at all. They did not have the same point of view. Yeah yeah… Which is it's really funny, and they came to me on both sides trying to swap groups. And then I think that was a lot of communication to make sure, like they…… 'cause when they come to the UK they're gonna find out there's a lot more situation like that going on. You can't just bow out of it. You have to try to adapt yourself to the situation. (Intern 4)

Others commented that their involvement in the online pre-sessional course helped them with their listening skills and English-speaking fluency in addition to their ability to convey information. This was not surprising as Kato et al's (2016) study on the use of Skype and language learning found that videoconferencing can boost language confidence and is an effective way of increasing listening skills and speech speed. All the interns noted that the challenges in the online environment reinforced the importance of using a calm and clear voice and effective communication.

7.1.2 Dealing with culture and identity

All the interns seemed to exhibit empathy for the online pre-sessional students and what they were experiencing. They all highlighted how difficult it was for the students to engage at the beginning of the course and that meant they needed to respond to a lot of questions outside of the synchronous sessions. The interns also acknowledge the difference between Chinese students' behaviour in the UK and China. One explained that out of respect, students are more likely to ask a friend than approach a teacher. This could imply that pre-sessional students saw the interns more as friends or mentors who could support them with their learning (Patang & Machmoed, 2020).

Despite this, the interns regularly commented on the pre-sessional students' behaviour in the online classroom. One intern expressed frustration at some of the students' lack of engagement and being asked the same questions repeatedly, and yet at the same time, they seemed to be critically reflecting on their own previous actions.

> I feel a little bit annoyed, but I still understand. I did the same stupid mistakes in the past as well. (Intern 3)

The interns also commented on the difference between teaching in their home country as opposed to the UK, and the challenges of engaging with online pre-sessional students. In doing so, the interns expressed an appreciation and newfound understanding of the teachers as they felt it was not easy to get the students to partake in activities in the online environment and that dealing with student behaviour could be challenging. It was noted that the interns did not feel as if they could be critical of the Chinese students' behaviour because they were in a UK context, and there was some frustration around this.

> You're so annoyed, and you cannot criticise them [the students] about they're lazy, or something. Well, you cannot force them to do anything. That's so annoying. If they were in China, we just force you... [and the students would be okay with that] (Intern 3)

The three undergraduate interns mentioned dealing with culture and their own identity, including their mastery of English and the skills needed to be successful at university. Jurkova & Guo (2018) suggest that one can only really understand their culture when they step outside of it. It was clear throughout the interviews that the interns were trying to make sense of previously held values and beliefs. In doing so, they seemed to be trying to unpick the differences between the pre-sessional students and the person they used to be, and the person the intern had now become.

The online pre-sessional also appeared to help the interns gain a better understanding of their online persona and how they could be perceived by others. One explained that it was not only the students who felt uncomfortable speaking online. Rather he did not believe that online communication showed his authentic self, and he seemed frustrated by this, stating:

> I talk better in person rather than being on Zoom or Teams. (Intern 3)

and

> I am a lot more likeable in person [and it] was definitely a challenge for me. (Intern 3)

In contrast, Intern 4 commented that the experience on the online pre-sessional "empowered me" and "helped me see myself from a different perspective", stating that working with other international people "changed my mindset". Kumi-Yeboah & James (2014, p. 26) would argue that this was part of the development process where one alters "their views of culture during the period of adaptation". Interestingly, this intern had been studying in the UK for the past 7 years, so it was somewhat unexpected that this online experience has such a profound impact on the individual. Ritz (2010) noted that previous educational experiences could affect transformative learning, so it is unclear if this is a continuation of what the student was already experiencing, or a new phenomenon, what Mezirow (2000) referred to as an epochal event associated with their work on the online pre-sessional. Taylor (2008) argues that when an individual faces constant change, such as working on an intense online pre-sessional course, the frame of reference needs to be expanded to make sense of the evolving environment. This is especially true when faced with daily intercultural encounters over a sustained period.

The interns identified further evidence of Mezirow's (2012) stages of transformative learning such as gaining knowledge, building competence and self-confidence in new roles. For instance, intern 2 talked about being out of her comfort zone as she had never experienced anything like this before. She described her experience as a "big challenge" and explained how she pushed herself to learn more so she could support the students well.

7.1.3 Workplace practices

Two of the undergraduate student interns focused on the difference between working styles in the UK and their home countries. Both commented on teamwork, supportive colleagues and the importance of a happy work environment, with Intern 2 stating:

> It's very different working when like compared to where I work, which is China, because everyone is so supportive, but in when I was back in China... People are used to compete a lot. It's not a very friendly environment. For example, me and [the other interns]. We help each other. We learn from each other.

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Several interns mentioned the importance of leadership skills, not only the opportunity to practise leadership skills, but also develop leadership skills by working closely with the teachers and the course leaders who they respected. Others commented that the experiences helped them improve their time management and organisational skills.

In this regard, it seems the interns were able to progress through what Faulk and Morris (2012, p.17) describe as the "core transformative learning approaches". Cranton (2006) points out critical thinking is the foundation of transitional learning as it enables learners to reflect on and reevaluate their beliefs and ideas. The interns appeared to be engaging in transformative learning through reflection, self-reflection and discourse with their colleagues. During the interview, the research participants described a situation where they had an "equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse" (Mezirow, 1994, p.225). They explained how they listened to and learned from each other and used different approaches to see what worked. Through awareness and exploration of their roles and identities, they were able to define what brings them joy in the workplace. They were also able to redefine what they believed to be good practice and discuss how they could apply this to their future situations.

> So, I think it's [the online pre-sessional] given me a lot of examples of how I can develop further. You know, one thing especially, I'm in a weekly setting, and I'm doing some reflection on what I haven't done well in my current team. So, I'll review back about my journey experience in the past job and what you guys did. (Intern 3)

The interns highlighted that their experience on the online pre-sessional fostered patience and helped them develop better communication skills. Many of them noted that the experience taught them how to set expectations and establish clearer boundaries in the workplace. It also seemed to help boost self-esteem and self-confidence. Others stated that if they are in this type of situation again, they would be better able to handle it. In this regard, the interns' percept of the online pre-sessional was positive. Nevertheless, all research participants felt that the pre-sessional would have been a more enjoyable experience and the students would have felt more connected in an in-person environment.

7.2 RQ2: To what extent did the interns experience transformative learning while working on the online pre-sessional course?

The research findings suggest that working on the online pre-sessional courses contributed to some form of transformative learning for all participants. However, unpicking the cause and extent are not so straightforward. Many of the instances of transformative learning during the online pre-sessional course were organically derived as they were associated with work issues or problems that the intern needed to solve and were not necessarily dependent on the online learning environment itself. The interns also had a dual identity as both student and staff that seemed to contribute to transformative learning, and that would have been the case regardless of the context. The type of students studying on the pre-sessional would have likely been the same in a face-to-face and online environment. Working with learners who may have represented their former selves would have been a constant yet likely influential factor in their development.

Nevertheless, the online environment comes with unique challenges that the interns may not have experienced in a face-to-face learning context such as supporting learners with poor digital literacy skills, technological issues, switched off cameras and limited opportunities to connect with teachers and peers, and it was these challenges that seemed to create opportunities for growth and development. Taylor (1998) reinforces the importance of context in critical reflection and meaning making processes, so it may have been the unique combination of factors in that particular context that enhanced the transformation. Mazirow (1991) would likely refer to the interns' experience as a disorienting situation that allows them to alter their point of view through exploring different ideas, finding solutions together as a team and critically reflecting. In doing this, they were able to reevaluate their deeply held assumptions and beliefs about their culture and themselves.

An added consideration is that not all the participants seemed to experience the same level of transformative learning. For instance, there was a distinct difference between the undergraduate and postgraduate responses. The undergraduate students seemed to share more instances of what could be perceived as transformative learning compared with the postgraduate student. Taylor (2007) points out that it is difficult to gauge levels of critical reflection as not all are of equal significance. It could be more associated with the

assessment of reflection, rather than the lack of reflection. Other factors such as previous experiences of learning and personality traits could also affect transformative learning (Ritz, 2010). Therefore, it could be down to the individual not the fact that the intern was a postgraduate student. In addition, only Chinese student interns were interviewed in this study. This was not a methodological choice, but rather, because all the interns working on the summer pre-sessional were from China. To have a clearer perspective, a wider and more diverse range of participants is needed.

8. Conclusion

This small-scale study explored the experiences of four international student interns' while working on an online pre-sessional programme. In doing so, it investigated the extent that working on these types of online courses can offer transformative learning opportunities. The findings suggest that they can contribute to some form of transformative learning, however, it is unclear to what extent the online learning context alone is responsible for this outcome. There needs to be further research in this area as HE educators and policymakers would benefit from a better understanding of the factors that promote transformative learning in international students (Kumi–Yeboah & James, 2014). This is especially important now as UK institutions continue to explore overseas markets which has led to an increasing number of international students taking online courses.

9. Further research

It would be useful to go back to the research participants and explore if the interview itself helped them reflect on their experience. By going through the interview process, the participants had a chance to discuss their experiences and growth as an intern. I believe this process could create an opportunity for transformative learning as it included critical reflection, critical self-reflection and discourse (Taylor, 2018, Faulk & Morris, 2012). Moreover, Ritz (2010) notes that critical reflection may not happen with international students until they return to their home country. Therefore, in line with Taylor (2000), a mixed-method longitudinal study would enable the level of transformative learning to be gauged.

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