

Effects of Study-Abroad Experiences on the Second Language and Cultural Awareness of Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract

This article explores how social interactions and culture affect Chinese EFL learners during study abroad (SA). The participants, native Chinese speakers learning English as a foreign language spent varying durations in English-speaking countries. A comparative analysis was conducted, differentiating between participants engaged in a two-semester SA and those in a two-academic-year SA, revealing nuanced variations in the findings. Surprisingly, these variations were more strongly associated with Willingness to Communicate (WTC) than the duration of the SA. Furthermore, examining the duration since participants' return to China hinted individual differences in the perceived effects of their SA and subsequent acculturation. Notably, individuals who spent more time back in their home country after SA tended to develop a stronger sense of identification with their native culture. Intriguingly, these individuals also exhibited a heightened sensitivity to cultural shocks during their SA. The study also explored the correlation between cultural adaptability, strength of ethnic consciousness, and learners' English proficiency, positing that this dynamic is unstable. The cultural and linguistic effects revealed by these findings provide valuable insights for learners contemplating studying abroad. Additionally, they bear significant pedagogical implications for EFL classroom teaching, both domestically and internationally.

Keywords: study abroad; EFL learners; language effects; cultural impacts

Introduction

The SA experience encompasses a range of possibilities that can significantly influence various aspects of learners' lives. Studying a second language (L2) abroad presents the opportunity to immerse oneself in a new language, culture, and society, and the chance to transform one's identity (Pellegrino, 2005). Study abroad (SA) programs are widely embraced globally by Chinese EFL Learners, yet effects of SA on L2 and cultural awareness of Chinese EFL Learners have garnered limited attention from researchers. Existing research often investigates improvements in language skills or shifts in attitudes among cohorts of college students who typically engage in overseas programs lasting 3 to 6 months (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009). The primary emphasis lies on the duration spent in a foreign country (Coleman, 2013) or the proficiency in L2 pragmatics (Lee, 2013). There has been a notable dearth of research investigating the long-term sustainability of these potential effects. Furthermore, Most of the research on study abroad has primarily centered on assessing tangible outcomes, concentrating on the quantifiable progress students achieve in language skills and linguistic understanding during their time abroad. Research often overlooks an in-depth exploration of the study abroad process, specifically the firsthand experiences and perspectives of learners living in

a foreign country, immersed in the target language, and navigating a different culture and social environment than their own. This article has been motivated by the interest of gathering evidence from individuals who had returned to their home country four months to 10 years after their study abroad experiences, aiming to determine whether and to what degree the impact of their SA experiences persisted or diminished. The significance of students' viewpoints in shaping the language and intercultural learning journey and the importance of researching student perspectives in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) are also taken into account. Here arise the questions: How do individuals, who have returned home after varying durations, evaluate the lasting impact of their study abroad experiences in their L2? How do interactions with professors, native speakers (NSs), and the social environment shape individuals' cultural perceptions and self-development?

Literature review

In the past decades, numerous researches have been carried out to assess the impact of SA programs on the English proficiency of EFL learners. Some scholars (Evans & Fisher, 2005; Llanes & Munõz, 2009) have examined the duration of SA programs concerning language improvements, specifically investigating if a brief SA period could positively impact language skills. In their 2009 study, Amuzie and Winke found that longer study abroad (SA) durations positively correlated with increased learner autonomy, indicating that SA promotes active engagement in the target language. Cited in Allen(2010), concerning the ideal duration for effective SA experiences, scholarly investigations have consistently indicated that stays ranging from 3 to 12 months yield the most substantial linguistic advancements. Steinwider (2015) noticed that some effects at the end or right after SA may not endure and warrant periodic reassessment. Further advancements may also manifest well after the participants' return. Similarly, Martinsen (2010) highlights that engaging in a study abroad experience doesn't necessarily ensure proficient language development and learning. Many studies agree that learners' speaking skills (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004) and listening skills (Cubillos, Chiefo, & Fan, 2008) receive enormous gains during and immediately after SA programs. Cited in Kang (2014), the willingness to communicate (WTC) significantly impacts the frequency of engaging in interactions using L2. Likewise, research on pronunciation skills has observed more substantial enhancement in students who had a study abroad experience compared to those who remained in their home country (Díaz-Campos, 2004). In a study referenced by DeKeyser (2007), Allen noted a moderate effect size in improvements in listening skills among 25 English-speaking learners of French who spent 6 weeks abroad. Martinsen(2010) suggests that individuals with lower proficiency levels demonstrate more significant advancements in comparison to those with higher proficiency levels during a study abroad experience. However, Kang (2014) cited DeKeyser's view that reaching a particular proficiency threshold is essential for language learners to derive optimal benefits from their SA experiences. In addition to linguistic competence, contemporary case studies recognize that the study abroad encounter can exert influence across diverse domains of learners. Schumann (1986) suggested that a learner's mastery of the target language is intricately tied to their level of acculturation within the specific target culture. In line with Schumann, Jackson (2008) explored the links between language, culture, and identity in a five-week study abroad program to England with fifteen Chinese female university students. She discovered that active engagement with the host culture significantly aided in better adaptation. Moreover, participants regarded the SA experience as highly influential, shaping intercultural communication skills, personal growth, self-esteem, and identity. The phenomenon of re-entry shock was also identified in some individuals. Similarly, Coleman (2013) emphasizes the necessity for researchers to consider both the complete individual and the broader context in order to comprehensively grasp the study abroad phenomenon. Notably,

Noels et al. (1996) studied a group of Chinese students in Canada, analyzing linguistic self-confidence, lifestyle, contact with L1 and L2 groups, and ethnic identity. They underscored acculturation's pivotal role in SLA. Students aligning with Canadian culture showed a similar lifestyle and higher English confidence, contrasting with those with a stronger Chinese ethnic identity, demonstrating a lifestyle congruent with Chinese culture and lower English self-confidence. This study will simultaneously delve into comprehensive perspectives on the SA experience as reported by learners who have undergone this immersion.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing interviews and introspections to delve into the perceptions of tertiary-level EFL learners regarding their SA experiences upon returning to their home country. This qualitative methodology offers a profound understanding of individual experiences and perspectives, shedding light on private thoughts, expectations, and attitudes that quantitative measures may overlook. However, critics highlight its subjectivity and potential lack of scientific rigor due to the absence of large cohort groups, random selection, or control groups, making the establishment of validity, reliability, and generalizability challenging. Despite these criticisms, introspective methods provide unique insights into the ways learners construct meaning from their experiences, which quantitative scales and observations may not capture adequately.

To facilitate this exploration, the study sought perceptual data that tapped into the emotions, attitudes, and perspectives of the participants, prioritizing the understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences rather than focusing solely on the objective events. Utilizing a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to unravel the intricate and distinct SA experiences and their perceived effects. SA experiences serve as pivotal moments that can alter learner's view of the world, culture and self-perceptions, emphasizing that it's the learner's interpretation of the past that significantly shapes their current self, rather than the past events themselves. Each SA participant brings their unique perspectives and attitudes, influencing their goals, actions, and interpretations of past experiences, consequently affecting their evaluations of their present cultural cognition and mindset within their current contexts. This narrative lens allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals situate themselves and their activities in the world, aiding in comprehending the complex interplay of past experiences and present language and culture evaluations in the realm of SA.

Participants

Twelve Chinese-native speakers of English as a Foreign Language took part in this study, with nine being male and three female. The participants varied in age from 23 to 40 and had spent between one year to two years in English-speaking countries, including the U.K, U.S, Canada, Belgium, Singapore, and Malaysia, Philippines. All participants were raised in mainland China and had stayed abroad for over two semesters. In terms of ethnicity, all participants were Chinese. Before the interviews, eleven participants had pursued or were pursuing a Master's or Doctoral degree abroad, and one participant had completed a College diploma. At the time of the interview, one participant was pursuing a Ph.D in Business Management in the Philippines. English proficiency varied among the participants, with one having low proficiency (Ielts general 3.8), one with intermediate proficiency, and the remaining ten with high/advanced proficiency. The SA program majors covered a range of fields, including Interpreting and Translating, International Relations, International Media, Business, Economics, Digital Sociology, Bioengineering, and Sports Science. One participant had previously attended a four-month INTO OSU summer camp program in his teens before coming to Malaysia, and a few others report they had travel experiences in English-speaking countries before their SA experience. One participant went to U.S to work and spent two years on his post-doctoral

program. Accommodation primarily consisted of apartments shared with individuals who were non-native English speakers, except for two participants who resided with host families for a portion of their time. For a detailed summary of the participants, each identified by a pseudonym, and their respective destination countries, refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Participants Detailed Summary

	Group A: 0—2years back in China	Group B: 2—14 years back in China
One year abroad	Hannah(79mins)(Age:23) Location: England Duration: 1 year Time back: 5months Subject: digital sociology	Judy (107mins)(Age:40) Location: England Duration: 1year Time back: 14 years Subject: Media and Communications
		Bruce(60mins)(Age:27) Location: England Duration: 1year Time back: 3years Subject: Economics
		Michael(100mins) (Age:40) Location: England Duration: 1year Time back: 5 years Subject: Interpreting and Translating
		Jack (77mins)(Age:33) Location: Belgium Duration: 1year Time back: 5 years Subject: Public Health Other SA: pursuing Ph.D in Philipines(2022—present)
Two years abroad	Keria(40mins) (Age:23) Location: England Duration: 1 year Time back: 4months Subject: International relations	Hunter(95mins)(Age:27) Location: Malaysia Duration: 2023—present Time back: 8 years Subject: sports science Former SA: 4-month summer camp in England(9years ago),6-month into-OSU program(8years ago)
		Aron (52mins) (Age:23) Location: U.S. Duration: 1year Time back: 10 years Subject: Hotel Management
Two years abroad	Way (65mins)(Age:23) Location: Singapore Duration: 2 years	David(117mins) (Age:32) Location: U.S. Duration: 5 years

	Group A: 0—2years back in China	Group B: 2—14 years back in China
	Time back: 6 months Subject: Microelectronic Technology	Time back: 5months Subject: Bioengineering Former SA: 6-month visiting scholar program in England(6 years ago)
	Cesar(47mins)(Age:22) Location: England Duration: 3year Time back: 1 year Subject: management consulting	Leon (45mins)(Age:34) Location: Canada Duration: 2 years Time back: 10 years Subject: Logistics management

Data Collection and Analysis

To comprehensively explore the shifts in participants' perceptions and experiences, a qualitative approach involving interviews was employed to gather perceptual data. The objective was to delve into the intricate nuances of how Study Abroad influenced the participants. To facilitate this exploration, participants were provided with adequate time to reflect on their SA journey, the changes they perceived, and the enduring aspects of these transformations. Structured around a set of predefined questions, the interviews covered diverse aspects, including personal backgrounds, willingness to communicate in English at different stages of the SA process, self-confidence, independence, and acculturation. The use of a semi-structured, retrospective approach allowed for flexibility and spontaneity, encouraging participants to express unexpected variations and delve deeper into their experiences, offering a richer understanding of their SA encounters. To facilitate this exploration, participants were provided with adequate time to reflect on their SA journey, the changes they perceived, and the enduring aspects of these transformations. In line with ethical considerations and to ensure accuracy in data capture, the interview was recorded with the permission of the participants. This not only allowed for a detailed analysis but also upheld transparency and respect for the participants' contributions.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, an approach that enables the identification and exploration of patterns, themes, and variations within the data. This method allows for a systematic examination of the content, providing valuable insights into the multifaceted aspects of the participants' SA experiences. During the analysis process, I documented recurring themes, noteworthy observations, and critical insights, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives and the essential elements of their SA journeys. In this stage of the analysis, I carefully noted participants' expressions, emotions, and reactions, aiming to capture the richness and depth of their experiences. Additionally, I looked for subtle psychological factors that could elucidate the observed individual differences, providing a nuanced perspective on how the SA experience impacted each participant uniquely.

Moreover, I incorporated Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory as a robust theoretical underpinning for this phase of the analysis. This framework offers profound insights into the significant role of social interactions and cultural elements in shaping cognitive development, learning, and personal growth. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), representing the space between a learner's current abilities and their potential abilities with guidance, was particularly valuable in interpreting the interview data. The semi-structured nature of the interviews, allowing for flexibility and spontaneous responses, reflected the ZPD concept by providing participants with the support and guidance needed to articulate their experiences. This approach led to a deeper under-

standing of their perceptions and personal growth during their SA journey. By employing a socio-cultural lens in this analysis, I aimed to enhance comprehension of how social interactions and cultural influences contributed to the shifts in participants' L2 acquisition, perceptions and experiences throughout their SA journey.

Results

The primary findings emanating from this study underscore a unanimous conviction shared by all participants regarding the profound value attributed to their SA experience. This encompassed a holistic spectrum of personal, social, cultural, linguistic, and academic advancements. A comparative examination distinguishing between participants engaged in a two-semester SA and those partaking in a two-academic-year SA revealed nuanced variations within the findings, surprisingly associated more with WTC than the duration of the SA. Additionally, a comparative analysis concerning the duration of time since participants' return to China—categorized into less than two years (Group A) and more than two years (Group B)—hinted at noticeable individual disparities in the dynamics of perceived effects resulting from the SA experiences and subsequent acculturation.

Furthermore, these comparisons disclosed a prevalent positivity in the participants' remarks regarding the changes they underwent. Nearly all participants acknowledged language-related transformations, including heightened interest in English, a diminished apprehension of committing linguistic errors, and shifts in levels of independence and cultural inclusiveness post the SA experience. However, the study illuminated the idiosyncratic nature of these changes, illustrating the presence of individual variances in the perceived effects of SA experiences and acculturation dynamics. This research meticulously categorizes the findings into distinct modules, thoroughly examining personal aspects, including linguistic achievements/academic performance, and the cultural impact of studying abroad. Additionally, it delves into the broader dimensions of social and cultural influences.

Discussion

The effects of SA experiences on Chinese EFL learners' linguistic and academic achievements

The data underscored that linguistic effects were a dominant theme within the study. It became evident that the perceived linguistic impacts of SA varied significantly depending on the domain, exhibiting notable differences between listening, speaking, and writing. Delving into oral language skills, it was revealed that five students believed they had made substantial improvements in accent, intonation, fluency, or overall verbal output. Interestingly, two students highlighted that they had not only improved their English pronunciation but had also consciously and purposefully imitated the local speaker's accent, and, in some cases, underwent a transformative shift in their accents. Remarkably, nine participants reported experiencing the most significant enhancement in their listening abilities. Considering the strong link between speaking proficiency and listening skills, it is reasonable to infer that the majority of participants encountered some degree of advancement in listening, with the exception of a single student who emphasized that his listening skills remained at the same level as before SA. The overall consensus among learners was that SA represented the pinnacle of their second language development. Interestingly, five students expressed a belief that their English skills had regrettably declined since their return. However, these learners predominantly attributed this linguistic regression to their speaking skills, identifying a certain degree of decrease in oral fluency and vocabulary retention. They highlighted the lack of opportunities to engage in spoken English in China, where their jobs did not demand a high level of English proficiency. Specifi-

cally, they pointed to the scarcity or complete absence of chances to converse with native speakers on a daily basis as the primary reason for their perceived decline in this linguistic domain.

One participant, Michael, shared how during his time at the University of Bath in the UK, his English skills in listening, speaking, reading, all got a major boost except writing because the major doesn't require constant writing. He states as below:

It was the demanding nature of my specialized program during Study Abroad that significantly contributed. I was immersed in rigorous courses on simultaneous interpretation, requiring quick information processing and immediate responses. The university admission wasn't easy; they had strict admission criteria. Also, I already had a strong foundation, having completed a Master's in English before SA. After returning, my job's nature, which involved frequent flights to work on a cruise ship in Antarctica, helped me maintain a consistently high level of proficiency in English. The improvement wasn't as rapid as during my study abroad, but it remained steady.

Similarly, Jack, pursuing a Master's in Public Health Administration in Belgium, significantly improved his oral English during SA. The intense coursework posed initial challenges in adapting to various accents. He coped by dedicating ample time to daily review and preview. Immersed in conversations with Professors and fellow English-speaking students, he eventually grasped English lectures after two months. He found it easier to remember words in an English-speaking environment than in home country. He rated his English proficiency as medium-low in China. However, during SA, it rose to medium-high. He attributed this progress to the accumulation of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax knowledge in the early stages before SA. The language environment of SA encouraged active participation in speaking and listening, aided by interactions with international peers. Yet, upon returning to China, he faced frustration with declining speaking abilities. It took about 4-5 years, during his second month of doctoral studies in the Philippines, to gradually regain fluency. Despite efforts, he reported that he never fully reached the pinnacle as before.

As evidenced by these cases, both participants recognized the need to stay proactive in order to sustain their current level of linguistic proficiency. Like other participants, the student below (Hunter) also expressed the opinion that there aren't enough opportunities to practice spoken English in China. He comments:

Before pursuing my Master's in Sports Science in Malaysia, I had a four-month language course at Oregon State University after high school. Additionally, I attended a summer camp in the UK during high school. Initially, I would describe my speaking skills as low-level. During my SA experiences in the UK and the US, being young with a weak foundation, I struggled to communicate with native speakers or fully understand them. Upon arriving in Malaysia, my willingness to engage and communicate noticeably increased compared to my previous SA experiences and my stay in China. I believe my time studying in the US made me realize that, as a sports science student, improving oral proficiency requires more time and effort than students in other majors. Over the eight years after returning from SA, my English proficiency had its ups and downs. It peaked during the stages of preparing for postgraduate exams and taking IELTS, and then remained consistently high while studying in Malaysia.

On the contrary, Judy, who majored in English during her undergraduate studies, believes that her speaking proficiency and fluency in English did not notably improve during her time in the UK for SA. She observed that her WTC in classroom was actually better in her home country. According to her feedback, the overall lower proficiency level of many Chinese English learners when she went abroad was partly responsible for the perception. This situation led to professors forming stereotypes about Chinese students, resulting in fewer questions directed at them during class. It's important to highlight that before going abroad, she was already an advanced English learner,

achieving a 7 in both the IELTS speaking section and overall score. The factors hindering her willingness to actively engage in conversations during SA extended beyond cultural or classroom biases. Her unease in the foreign environment was partly due to a distressing incident where she had been followed by a stranger in the subway.

However, the following participant (David) well exemplifies Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory in how they demonstrate the influence of social and cultural factors on learning. According to his well-known concept the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Vygotsky viewed humans as actively shaping their understanding by interacting with the meanings assigned to objects in the social context (Verenikina, 2003). David states:

In my second year of a Hong Kong Ph.D. program, I visited the UK for four months. Despite improving my academic English in Hong Kong, I struggled with daily English in the UK. After completing my Ph.D. and moving to the United States for a post-doc program, I faced a tough start with rigorous writing and revisions. Regular interaction with American and Indian colleagues helped me adapt to English expressions and thinking and writing academic article in English. Having an American girlfriend also boosted both my spoken and written English. Upon returning to China, I tried to maintain my English by conducting seminars in English in my own laboratory, but the students found it challenging. Five years later, my English skills have slightly dipped, but I'm confident they would quickly rebound in an English-speaking environment.

The concept of ZPD aligns with the idea that learners benefit from ongoing assistance and support after the overseas experience in these excerpts. Extensive exposure to English and consistent practice within one's living environment situates learners in their ZPD, prolonging L2 development. Additionally, the learners' feedback underscores the necessity of continuous assistance and support post their SA experience for long-term effectiveness. Aside from notable progress in speaking, listening, and writing, four students emphasized improved reading skills, despite reading being strength for Chinese students. This improvement in reading speed occurred during their SA period due to extensive academic literature reading. Impressively, this enhancement has been sustained even upon their return to China, as their current occupations are more or less English-related.

Only one participant, Leon, felt his English improved slightly in listening during his two-year stay in Canada. He considered himself a low-level learner before and after the study abroad. This perception could be attributed to factors such as not completing his bachelor's degree during his stay and opting not to proceed to the third year of undergraduate courses. During SA, he lived with a Polish host family but had limited communication with them. In the second year, he attended classes and lived with Chinese international students, which did not substantially enhance his English skills. Unmet academic expectations during SA impacted his confidence in language improvement compared to other learners. Besides, the "home stay myth" (Wilkinson, 1997) suggesting that home stay significantly contribute to L2 acquisition and cultural knowledge did not hold true for Leon. It can be inferred that learners may feel inadequate in using L2 to achieve communication goals when faced with difficulties, which could discourage further efforts to engage.

The effects of SA experiences on Chinese EFL learners' cultural awareness

Nearly all participants acknowledged that SA impacted their intercultural communication abilities, cultural awareness, cultural insights, cultural confidence or inclusiveness. Twelve participants stated that they had become more open-minded and tolerant towards people from different cultures. The following excerpt is one of many examples that reflect how Aron gradually dispelled his stereotypes about Americans while studying in the United States:

Before coming to the United States, I thought Americans were extremely individualistic or indifferent towards others. I changed my perspective while driving alone to a national park, my tire

burst and I didn't notice. I drove into a small town where an elderly couple informed me about the flat tire and initiatively helped me change it. This incident deeply moved me. Only when I actually came to this country did I realize that although Westerners embrace individualism, are not as self-centered and indifferent as I had imagined.

Similarly, Michael contends that his significant shift in attitude towards divergent viewpoints is largely attributed to his SA experience:

Throughout my study abroad and work experiences in foreign countries, I frequently engaged with people from diverse backgrounds and social circles. My perspective significantly broadened compared to before going abroad. The overseas environment allows for the coexistence of diverse cultures, providing space for multiple perspectives when observing societal events. It diversifies the channels through which I obtain information. As you know, whether in the East or West, residing in the same environment for a prolonged period tends to provide a somewhat one-sided view of the world. Residing and studying in diverse countries exposed me to a more extensive information environment, allowing me to pursue a comprehensive understanding of the truth rather than blindly following popular opinions. When facing challenges, now I tend to make more objective judgments. I believe this experience cultivated my critical thinking and reflective abilities.

All participants mentioned their ability to comprehend diverse perspectives, yet seven noted a tendency to listen and tolerate differing opinions without blindly accepting them. This aligns with Byram's (2008) assertion that learners who possess intercultural competence should be able to identify differences in values and beliefs, but they are not obligated to adopt them. Hunter posits that attitudes towards diverse opinions are more inclusive and diverse abroad, while domestically, due to differences in Eastern and Western societal structures and China's policy-oriented nature, online public opinion tends to manifest in a binary opposition. This means that discussions and viewpoints often align with or oppose the prevailing policy or ideology, resulting in a stark division of perspectives without much room for middle ground or nuanced understanding. The given excerpts demonstrate the participants' recognition of the diverse and intricate nature of the Western media environment. Many others report that they achieve a considerably deeper understanding of the host culture compared to what could be achieved within several years on their home campuses. However, it does not imply that the study abroad experience led them to adopt a more Westernized ideology. In fact, seven participants undergo substantial shifts in their perspectives concerning the target culture as well as their own culture and values. Four of them emphasize a heightened level of objectivity in their perspectives toward their home country. Judy states:

I see cultural confidence as a manifestation of cultural inclusivity. When I reflect on China's rich traditional culture, its inherent diversity and openness become evident. Our cultural values emphasize global peace, oppose hegemony, and consistently align with multilateralism and international justice. Our culture actively strives to create a community with a shared future for mankind. After SA, my appreciation for traditional Chinese culture has grown stronger. During my time abroad, it seems they provide more freedom of speech, making you feel acknowledged and respected. However, this was primarily because Westerners tend to be more open-minded and less stubborn on differing views. They express their opinions firmly while allowing others to do the same, they don't necessarily agree with each other sincerely though.

Similarly, Leon mentioned that before SA, he acted like an angry young man in China, struggling to tolerate various domestic issues and frequently questioning why regulations abroad seemed more humanized. However, he came to realize that the differences between China and the West lie in ideological and social system disparities. The multiculturalism and inclusiveness abroad

seem more like an inevitable compromise—an imperative societal acceptance of diverse ethnic groups.

Hannah emphasized a significant strengthening of her national identity during her SA period. She argues,

It was only after going abroad that I realized it's not just Chinese people jaywalking; people all around the world might jaywalk—it shouldn't be related to the overall quality of a nation. During my time abroad, I became acutely aware of being Chinese and missed traditional Chinese festivals and culture even more. I never felt the need to organize an elaborate dinner during the Spring Festival while I was in China. However, during my study abroad in that particular spring, I took additional efforts to prepare a grand feast. Encountering fellow Chinese individuals or spotting the Chinese national flag abroad more readily evoked my sense of identity and national pride.

Participants noted an improvement in their capacity to identify and appreciate both positive and negative attributes. Moreover, this heightened awareness contributed to a deeper understanding of their individual identities. They gained insight into the diverse characteristics that constitute their personal makeup, resulting in a more comprehensive perception of self.

Understanding others' perspectives and emotions in a diverse cultural environment, is termed by Byram as empathy. This is a task language learners are expected to engage in during SA. It requires understanding and explaining events in both other cultures and one's own culture. Due to cultural differences and cultural shocks, strong cultural adaptability and cross-cultural mediation skills are needed, presenting a challenge for many EFL learners. Bruce encountered a language misunderstanding when attempting to purchase apples in a foreign supermarket during his study abroad. Upon being informed that apples were unavailable, he responded with a Chinese expression, "I don't mind" intending to convey "it's okay" or "no worries" in English. However, this phrase was misinterpreted by the clerk, resulting in offense and a disdainful look. This also challenges many EFL learners' traditional belief that making language mistakes is more tolerated in western countries. Leon had a similar encounter during his stay in Canada. He attempted to return the Canadian dollars previously borrowed from a faculty member at the airport. However, he was met with a severe blame from the other person. The reasoning was that repaying money in a public setting could attract the attention of potential wrongdoers, posing a threat to personal safety. Due to Leon's limited speaking proficiency, he struggled to effectively communicate the cultural norm prevalent in China, where settling debts in a timely manner is seen as a polite gesture.

The following participant believes that acquiring cultural knowledge is attainable through engaging in communication with others. Jack recalled a cross-cultural conversation he had with a local classmate during his doctoral studies in the Philippines, illustrating how it heightened his awareness of cultural differences:

When I learned that my classmate Ginny's father had passed away years ago, I asked if her mother had remarried. She immediately seemed offended and explained, "In the Philippines, it's acceptable for a young widow to remarry, but my mom is in her fifties. If she were to remarry, it would be absurd". I promptly eased the situation, telling her that I was unfamiliar with Philippines culture and had no intention of causing offense. I added that in China, finding a partner in a widow's later years for companionship is considered acceptable and natural.

The presented example illustrates that during SA, some learners employ strategies to tactfully avoid offending native speakers. Concurrently, recognizing cultural differences contributes to progress in cross-cultural communication skills. However, many learners lack widespread awareness of these skills, influenced by individual factors like WTC, personality traits, and cultural sensitivity. The aforementioned examples underscore that most learners only become acutely aware and reflect

on the potential impact of cultural shocks on their language proficiency and cultural confidence when they encounter communication barriers. For example, David elaborated on how he gained an understanding of the varying meanings of the word “sarcastic” across different cultures:

I’m still not quite clear on the usage of “sarcastic” in American colloquial language. Sometimes, when it’s pouring rain outside, my American colleague in the lab would say to me, “what a lovely day for patio dining.” I asked him, “seriously?” and he replied, “just sarcastic”. Initially, I thought sarcasm was meant to be mocking, so I felt kind of offended.

This notable difference in understanding a particular word between the two cultures arises from their prevalent cultural values. Americans, valuing high individualism, frequently employ sarcasm to inject humor into the mundane, aiming to entertain and share light-hearted moments with friends. On the other hand, most Chinese individuals are ingrained with collectivist values from childhood. As a result, they tend to be less receptive to American humor. It’s akin to a situation where something might sound humorous, but the essence is lost, or I can’t quite catch on to your sarcasm. Byram’s (1997) question about the transition from a bicultural speaker to an intercultural mediator is relevant in the above four instances. The challenge stems from precisely defining the necessary language skills for proficient engagement in intercultural interactions. Hence, addressing Byram’s intricate question about whether a bicultural speaker can effectively transform into an intercultural mediator is no simple task. This complexity arises from the need to precisely define the language skills essential for adeptly engaging in intercultural interactions (Witold, 2010)

Both Group A and Group B believe that a longer SA duration is more conducive to cultural development. Meanwhile, all participants agree that cultural adaptation abroad is not directly related to WTC. Regardless of the length of stay, all of them claim to have quickly adapted to the new foreign environment during SA. Some individuals in both groups, such as Aron and Keria, argue that upon returning home, they initially become more critical of their native culture. However, they quickly adapt to their home culture. Hence, it’s reasonable to suggest that individuals who spent a year studying abroad, heavily focused on academics and with limited social engagements, may still feel a sense of nostalgia for the new cultural environment. Typically, these individuals were already open to the host culture even before their departure. Upon coming back to their home country, they might undergo a phase of reverse culture shock in the initial months. This account underscores the significance of adapting to different cultures during study abroad experiences and offers diverse participants’ unique insights, which can be valuable for individuals considering international studies.

Conclusion

This study indicates that SA experience has an impact on learners’ language proficiency and cultural integration. The results underscore that a majority of participants felt a decline in their oral language abilities after returning home. Some students, whose post-sojourn occupations were unrelated to English, experienced a sustained decrease in motivation to further improve their English proficiency. The progress made during the SA period also depended on the positive feedback and tolerance for mistakes received in the teaching and social environments. In comparison, participants almost unanimously believed that the intercultural gains, such as an open mind and tolerance, had a lasting impact on their cultural development. However, it is noteworthy that most participants revealed their interactions with native speakers during the SA period were typically confined to daily greetings, unless the conversation ventured into their specific professional domains. Regarding cultural adaptability and the strength of ethnic consciousness, and their correlation with learners’ English proficiency, this study posits that their dynamics is unstable. When learners embrace a bi-

cultural approach, holding positive views towards both their racial group and the second language community, their English learning tends to be most effective. This aligns with Polat and Schallert's (2013) assertion that the most successful learners strongly identify with both cultures. Their retrospective reports suggest that learners' preparation for their future job competitiveness, considering seeking opportunities to enhance language proficiency, their interest in target language, target culture, its people are linked to their language gains. The sense of belonging to one's own ethnic group and strong identity does not impact their ultimate language learning outcomes, although the influence of a single-culture identity on the speed of learning a second language falls beyond the scope of this study. Self-reports and data analysis results from Groups A and B indicate that, on one hand, a longer duration of SA does not guarantee a proportionate increase in language skill acquisition. On the other hand, individuals who have experienced SA and spend a longer time back in their home country tend to develop a stronger sense of identification with their native culture. Interestingly, these individuals experienced a heightened sensitivity to cultural shocks during their SA.

However, conducting retrospective studies has its limitations. There's a chance that the participants chose to share information selectively perhaps to portray a positive image of themselves during their SA experience, given that most Chinese learners are concerned about saving face. Secondly, due to the limited sample size, this study did not employ quantitative research to consolidate the author's arguments. Future research could delve further into the dynamic changes among language learning, ethnic consciousness, and duration of study abroad. It could also explore which aspect—pre-SA immersive language learning or language learning during SA—has a more significant enhancement effect. Despite these limitations, all the content reported in this study is authentic. It precisely reflects how participants' introspection and retrospection on their SA experience elucidate the profound impact of their sojourn on their self-growth and cultural identity. This provides valuable insights for learners who are uncertain about pursuing studies abroad. Additionally, it holds pedagogical significance for EFL classroom teaching both domestically and internationally.

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