

# The personal, linguistic, and intercultural development of Chinese sojourners in an English-speaking country

## The impact of language attitudes, motivation, and agency

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The number of Chinese students who are joining international exchange programs has increased significantly in recent years, with the majority enrolling in English-medium courses in the host country. To better understand how to prepare and support their learning, the present study investigated the developmental trajectories of 149 students from a Hong Kong university who participated in a semester-long exchange program in an English-speaking country. By way of questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and document analysis (e.g., study plans, responses to email prompts), this mixed methods inquiry tracked their evolving attitudes, motivation, and depth of investment in language and intercultural learning. As well as individual differences, the findings brought to light environmental factors that led to differing outcomes. While some participants developed more self-efficacy in English and meaningful intercultural friendships, others found it difficult to overcome language and cultural barriers, suggesting the need for interventions to bolster language enhancement and intercultural engagement.

**Keywords:** international exchange programs, advanced second language learners, intercultural competence, motivation, language attitudes, Chinese sojourners, agency, mixed methods

### 1. Introduction

The number of students who are studying outside their home country for part of their tertiary education is on the rise. According to a report issued by the British Council, approximately 3.85 million higher education students will study abroad

by 2024, up from 3.04 million in 2011, with China and India accounting for 35 percent of the growth. The vast majority of students from Greater China study in a second language (L2) while abroad, with English the most common medium-of-instruction, and the United States the most popular host destination (British Council, 2013).

Many educators believe that exposure to a native speech community and the use of the host language in formal classroom situations provides optimal conditions for the advancement of L2 proficiency and intercultural communication skills. Recent research, however, is finding that immersion in the host environment is not guaranteed and study abroad outcomes are highly variable (Coleman, 2013; VandeBerg, Paige, & Lou, 2012). A growing number of study abroad specialists (e.g., Jackson, 2012; Kinginger, 2013) are therefore calling for more investigations that delve into the language learning and intercultural experiences of L2 sojourners. In particular, mixed methods studies are needed to identify and gain deeper insight into the individual and environmental elements that can result in disparate outcomes.

This paper focuses on the second phase of an explanatory sequential mixed methods study that tracked the language and intercultural learning of Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese students who participated in a semester-long international exchange program in an English-speaking country. The outcomes of the first (pre-sojourn) phase are presented in Jackson (2016a). While discussion in this paper largely centers on the sojourn learning and experiences of Chinese students, many of the findings are apt to resonate with other L2 sojourners.

## 2. Literature review

This study explores how differences in language attitudes, motivation, and agency can affect intercultural engagement and L2 enhancement in the host environment. Language attitudes, that is, the feelings that individuals have about their own language variety or the language varieties of others, can impact their motivation to learn and use their L2 both in their home environment and abroad (Garrett, 2010; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). A positive view of the host language and culture is thought to inspire newcomers to interact with host nationals, whereas negative perceptions may hamper their willingness to use their L2 and engage in intercultural interactions (Isabelli-García, 2006).

Within the context of study abroad, motivation is sometimes referred to as expectations, drives, motives, reasons, and aspirations (Isabelli-García, 2006; Kinginger, 2009; Krzakelwska, 2008). Psycholinguists have identified many types of motivation, including an instrumental orientation (e.g., the learning of an L2 to

be able to do postgraduate studies abroad) and an integrative orientation (e.g., the learning of informal L2 speech to become close to host nationals) (Gardner, 1985; 2010; Gregersen & Macintyre, 2014; Jackson, 2016a).

More recently, drawing on self-determination theory, personality trait psychology, social cognitive theory, and attribution theory, Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System has drawn attention to the impact of learner-specific elements (e.g., proficiency level, personality traits, cognitive ability, emotional state, self-identities) and learning situational factors (e.g., teacher, school culture, socio-political environment) on an individual's L2 motivation, which can change over time. Dörnyei's model consists of the 'Ideal L2 self' (an individual's imagined ideal language self-image), the 'Ought-to L2 self' (the envisioned traits or attributes that individuals believe they should possess in order to meet the expectations and avoid negative consequences), and the 'L2 learning experience' (situation-dependent motives associated with the learning environment and experience). This theoretical framework posits that L2 learning motivation is driven by the desire to reduce the gap between one's actual self and ideal possible selves. As this theory suggests, there is now more recognition of the dynamic, socially situated nature of motivation, and more awareness that the degree and type of L2 motivation may be self-determined or externally imposed on individuals (Dörnyei, Alastair, & MacIntyre, 2015; Ushioda, 2014).

It is often assumed that L2 students who participate in study abroad programs will have a strong motivation to integrate into the host community (e.g., make friends with host nationals) and, through immersion, experience significant gains in their L2 proficiency. For a variety of individual and environmental reasons, however, L2 sojourners may not develop meaningful intercultural relationships and may gain less exposure to the host language than anticipated (Coleman, 2013; Jackson, 2015a). Newcomers may possess a high level of willingness to communicate (WTC) in the host language (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998) and have expectations for significant gains in their proficiency, but find it difficult to initiate and sustain interactions in their L2. Self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., lack of confidence in their L2 ability) (Bandura, 1994; Ehrman, 1996; Graham & Weiner, 1995); limited linguistic self-confidence (Dörnyei, 2009; Mills, 2014; Sampasivam & Clément, 2014), low host receptivity (Jackson, 2012; Kinginger, 2009), a high degree of acculturative stress (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), limited access to the host language (e.g., differences in the quality and type of L2 input) (Howard, 2011, 2012; Isabelli-García, 2006); weak or fragile self-esteem (Rubio, 2014), and lack of agency (Coleman, 2013; Jackson, 2015a; Pavlenko, 2002) are just some of the many barriers that can hamper language and (inter)cultural learning on stays abroad.

The limited or ineffective use (or absence) of language and culture learning strategies has also been identified as a reason for unsatisfactory sojourn outcomes. Adopting an activity theory perspective, Allen (2013) tracked the self-regulatory strategies (e.g., motivation maintenance strategies, goal-setting strategies, and language-learning strategies) of American university students as they studied French in both the U.S. and France. Many of her participants had difficulty setting realistic language learning goals and those who did have specific L2 learning targets were unsure how to achieve them in the host environment. They expected L2 enhancement “to emerge organically” through immersion (p. 68).

In Ushioda’s (2008, p. 29) estimation, “research insights from learners themselves in a variety of learning contexts are much needed to substantiate and inform our theorizing, particularly in relation to the socially situated growth and regulation of motivation.” As motivation plays a central role in the way L2 sojourns unfold, this appeal should be heeded by study abroad scholars who are concerned with theory-building and program enhancement. To determine the most effective ways to nurture the learning and intercultural development of L2 sojourners both in and out of class, it is imperative for contemporary researchers to systematically investigate individual and contextual elements that can lead to divergent outcomes.

### 3. Theoretical framework and aims of the present study

The present study investigated the language and culture learning trajectories of Chinese student sojourners in English-speaking countries, drawing on the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009) and related theoretical constructs. This paper addressed the following questions that centered on sojourn learning:

1. Immediately after the semester-long international exchange program, what are the participants’ assessments of their sojourn learning, daily language use abroad, and English language proficiency?
2. In the host environment, did their sojourn aims, and their perceptions of and attitudes towards English and the host environment change? If yes, in what ways?
3. During the sojourn, what individual and environmental factors appeared to influence their English language and intercultural learning?
4. How did their sojourn in an English-speaking country impact their desire to further enhance their English language proficiency and intercultural communication skills?

## 4. Research design and methodology

### 4.1 Research design

Mixed methods research involves the mixing or integration of both quantitative (e.g., numeric information) and qualitative data (e.g., interview transcripts, texts) within a single investigation (Creswell, 2014). There are many design options and data may be collected either simultaneously or sequentially to best understand research problems (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Riazi, 2016; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010).

The present study consisted of a series of distinct periods of data collection (pre-sojourn, sojourn, post-sojourn) and employed a mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006; Ivankova & Greer, 2015). In this design, a researcher usually begins by collecting and analyzing quantitative (numeric) data to construct a general picture of the situation under study. The results can inform the design of protocols (e.g., list of interview questions), which aid the collection of various forms of qualitative data and enable a more in-depth understanding of the participants' views and context. The qualitative (text) data that is amassed and analyzed can then help to explain, refine, or elaborate on, the quantitative results (Creswell, 2014; Ivankova & Greer, 2015). In this way, the qualitative phase builds on the quantitative phase, and the two phases are again connected when the data from the different sources are triangulated. The premise of this approach is that the collection and integration of quantitative and qualitative data enables a more robust and complete picture of the learning situation than is possible when data of only one type is involved in the study (Creswell, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010).

### 4.2 Participants

The present study is part of a larger, mixed methods investigation of the learning of 246 students from a comprehensive, bilingual (Chinese-English) Hong Kong university who participated in a semester-long international exchange program (Jackson, 2016b). This paper centers on the 149 students who sojourned in an English-speaking country. In this cohort, there were 89 females (59.7%) and 60 (40.3%) males, with a mean age of 20.15 years and a mean Grade Point Average of 3.4 (out of 4), signifying above average academic performance. All of the participants were ethnic Chinese; 101 (67.8%) spoke Cantonese as a first language (L1) and 48 (32.2%) Putonghua (Mandarin). All spoke English as an additional language. 87 (58.4%) had attended an English-medium secondary school, while

62 (41.6%) went to a Chinese-medium (Cantonese or Putonghua) school, where English was taught as an additional language.

Prior to the international exchange program, 48 (32.2%) had never ventured outside their home country, while 79 (53.0%) had some travel experience, which typically consisted of a few days or weeks in Asia (e.g., short trips with family members or friends, or participation in organized tours). 34 (22.8%) had studied abroad; in most cases, this entailed a micro- or short-term sojourn (e.g., an English or Putonghua summer immersion program).

The participants came from the following faculties: 88 (59.1%) Business Administration, 24 (16.1%) Social Science, 14 (9.4%) Arts, 13 (8.7%) Science, and 10 (6.7%) Engineering. Few were language majors. When the sojourn got underway, 34 (22.8%) were in their second year of studies, 91 (61.1%) in their third year, 23 (15.4%) in their fourth, and 1 (0.7%) in the fifth year. For their semester-long sojourn, the participants went to the following destinations: 82 (55.0%) to the United States, 28 (18.8%) to Canada, 16 (10.7%) to Australia, 8 (5.4%) to the U.K., 7 (4.7%) to Singapore, 6 (4.0%) to New Zealand, 1 (0.7%) to Ireland, and 1 (0.7%) to South Africa. While abroad, nearly all did their coursework in English. For the sojourn, 116 (77.9%) lived on campus, 15 (10.1%) off-campus, and 1 (0.7%) in a homestay.

To gain a more in-depth understanding of their language and intercultural learning and developmental trajectories, 30 of the students were purposely selected following set criteria (e.g., no previous study abroad and a variety of disciplines and English-speaking destinations represented). With their consent, these individuals were interviewed before and after the sojourn, and a sampling ( $N = 10$ ) responded to email prompts while abroad. Among the interviewees, 19 (63.3%) were female and 11 (36.7%) male. The gender imbalance is similar to that in the full cohort. (See Table 1 for the code number and profile of each interviewee).

**Table 1.** Profile of interviewees

Code No.	Sex	L1	Birth-place	MOI Sec. School	TOEFL/IELTS score	Faculty	Major	Year of study	Host country
S1	M	P	PRC	C	97/7.0	Business Admin.	IBBA	3	Canada
S2	F	P	PRC	C	105/7.5	Business Admin.	PACC	3	USA
S3	F	P	PRC	C	93/6.5	Business Admin.	IBBA	3	Canada
S4	F	P	PRC	E	109/7.5	Social Science	PSYC	3	USA
S5	M	P	PRC	C	104/7.5	Science	RMSC	3	USA
S6	M	C	HK	E	104/7.5	Business Admin.	QFIN	3	Canada
S7	M	C	HK	E	94–101/7.0	Science	BCHE	4	Australia
S8	M	C	HK	E	98/7.0	Engineering	CENG	5	Singapore

Table 1. (continued)

Code No.	Sex	L1	Birth-place	MOI Sec. School	TOEFL/ IELTS score	Faculty	Major	Year of study	Host country
S9	F	P	PRC	C	102/7.5	Science	MATH	4	USA
S10	M	P	PRC	C	100/7.0	Engineering	IERG	3	USA
S11	F	C	HK	E	104/7.5	Social Science	PSYC	4	South Africa
S12	F	C	PRC	E	79-93/6.5	Social Science	ECON	4	New Zealand
S13	F	P	PRC	E	105/7.5	Business Administration	PACC	3	USA
S14	F	P	PRC	E	98/7.0	Business Admin.	IBBA	3	USA
S15	F	P	PRC	C	113/8.0	Science	RMSC	3	USA
S16	M	P	PRC	C	112/8.0	Business Admin.	PACC	3	USA
S17	F	C	PRC	E	102-109/7.5	Arts	TRAN	2	U.K.
S18	F	P	PRC	C	92/6.5	Engineering	SEEM	3	U.K.
S19	F	P	PRC	C	106/7.5	Science	RMSC	3	USA
S20	F	P	PRC	C	115/8.5	Science	LSCI	3	Canada
S21	M	C	HK	C	103/7.5	Business Admin.	PACC	3	Australia
S22	F	P	PRC	C	102/7.5	Science	RMSC	3	Canada
S23	F	C	HK	C	92/6.5	Business Admin.	IBBA	2	USA
S24	M	C	HK	C	79-93/6.5	Social Science	GPAD	2	USA
S25	F	P	PRC	C	101/7.0	Business Admin.	PACC	3	Canada
S26	M	C	PRC	E	103/7.5	Arts	CHLL	3	USA
S27	F	P	PRC	E	111/8.0	Social Science	COMM	3	USA
S28	F	C	HK	E	104/7.5	Business Admin.	IBBA	2	USA
S29	M	P	PRC	O	103/7.5	Science	PHYS	3	USA
S30	F	P	PRC	C	100/7.0	Science	MATH	4	USA

L1 = C, Cantonese; P, Putonghua; Birthplace: HK, Hong Kong; PRC, Mainland China;

MOI (medium-of-instruction) in secondary school: C, Chinese; E, English

English language proficiency test results: If the students provided a TOEFL score, the IELTS band is provided, and vice versa

Major: BCHE Biochemistry; CENG Computer Engineering; CHLL Chinese Language & Literature; COMM Journalism & Communication; ECON Economics; GPAD Government & Public Administration; IBBA Integrated BBA Program; IERG Information Engineering; LSCI Life Sciences; MATH Mathematics; PACC Professional Accountancy Program; PHYS Physics; PSYC Psychology; QFIN Quantitative Finance; RMSC Risk Management Science; SEEM Systems Engineering & Engineering Management; SOCI Sociology; TRAN Translation

The mean age of the interviewees was 20.30 years and the mean Grade Point Average 3.4 (out of 4). Similar to the full cohort, all of them were ethnic Chinese and spoke English as an additional language; 19 (63.3%) spoke Putonghua as an L1 and 11 (36.7%) Cantonese. 22 (73.3%) were born in Mainland China, while the

rest were born and raised in Hong Kong. 12 (40%) attended an English-medium secondary school, and 18 (60%) went to a Chinese-medium school, where English was taught as an additional language.

Prior to the sojourn, 22 (73.3%) of the interviewees had never travelled outside their home country; 8 (26.7%) had travel experience, which typically consisted of a few days or weeks in Asia. 8 (26.7%) had participated in a micro- or short-term language enhancement program (e.g., English, Putonghua) prior to joining the international exchange program.

When the sojourn got underway, 4 (13.3%) of the interviewees were in their second year of studies, 20 (66.7%) in their third year, 5 (16.7%) in their fourth year, and 1 (3.3%) in the fifth year. They came from the following faculties: 11 (36.7%) Business Administration, 9 (30.0%) Science, 5 (16.7%) Social Science, 3 (10.0%) Engineering, and 2 (6.7%) Arts. Among the interviewees, 17 (56.7%) sojourned in the U.S., 6 (20.0%) in Canada, 2 (6.7%) in Australia, 2 (6.7%) in the U.K., 1 (3.3%) in New Zealand, 1 (3.3%) in Singapore, and 1 (3.3%) in South Africa. For the sojourn, 21 (70.0%) lived on campus, and 9 (30.0%) in off-campus housing. None lived in a homestay.

### 4.3 Instrumentation and procedures

Before the sojourn, all of the participants completed the *Pre-International Exchange Questionnaire*, a survey designed to provide a profile of the full cohort and produce generalizable results about this population. This in-house instrument gathered demographic information, along with details about such aspects as: aims, expectations, and concerns about living and studying abroad, and L2 use / proficiency. While most items were closed, several open-ended questions invited the respondents to expand on their pre-sojourn views. With the written consent of the participants, their application forms (e.g., study plans) were also examined to gain additional insight into their aims and expectations for the sojourn.

A review of the quantitative results and applications helped to revise the protocol for the pre-sojourn semi-structured interview that was carried out with a subset of the survey respondents. Thirty interviewees shared their views in individual, qualitative, semi-structured interviews in English, Cantonese, or Putonghua, depending on their choice. In these sessions, which lasted 85 minutes, on average, they were also asked questions about their questionnaire survey responses. Translations of the interview transcripts were sent to participants for member checking (Creswell, 2014). After the participants arrived in the host country, a sampling of the interviewees ( $N = 10$ ) also responded to bi-weekly email prompts to provide more insight into their language and intercultural learning.



Immediately after the semester-long sojourn, the participants were invited to complete the online *Post-International Exchange Questionnaire*, an in-house instrument, which gathered information about their sojourn learning and experiences in the host country. Similar to the pre-sojourn questionnaire, this instrument largely generated quantitative data as it primarily consisted of closed questions. To facilitate the assessment of their learning, the instrument included many items that were similar to those in the *Pre-International Exchange Questionnaire*. Topics included: aims, expectations and level of preparedness for the sojourn; assessment of goals achieved / perceived gains; challenges faced while living and studying abroad; second language proficiency and use; perceptions of intercultural competence; social networks, identity; and suggestions for the preparation of future exchange students (Jackson, 2015b). The response rate for the online survey was 39.6% ( $N = 59$ ).

The statistical results helped to refine the protocol that was used for the semi-structured interviews that took place after the students returned to Hong Kong. The 30 students who were interviewed prior to the sojourn participated in individual, in-depth interviews that lasted approximately 100 minutes, on average. These sessions took place in their L1 or English, depending on the preference of the interviewee, and similar to the pre-sojourn interview, the returnees were also asked questions about their questionnaire survey responses. Translations of the post-sojourn interview transcripts were subjected to member checking (Creswell, 2014).

#### 4.4 Data analysis

The statistical data obtained from the pre- and post-questionnaire surveys were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The use of Likert-type scales to gauge participant views and gain an indication of their language use before, during, and after the sojourn enabled the production of basic descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency counts, means, standard deviations, cross-tabulations) (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The processing of the quantitative data helped to generate a detailed profile of the full cohort. As well as drawing attention to variations in pre-sojourn elements (e.g., aims, expectations, concerns, language use, intercultural contact), the analysis of this data raised awareness of differences in sojourn experiences and learning outcomes (e.g., perceptions of gains in language proficiency and intercultural competence, diversity in social networks).

NVivo 10, a qualitative software program, assisted the organization, coding, and triangulation of the rich qualitative data (e.g., study plans, interview transcripts, responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire surveys, replies to email prompts, research log). When processing the qualitative data, a thematic,

'open coding' approach (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Grbich, 2013) was employed, that is, the coding process was not restricted to preconceived ideas and categories (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). While some deductive codes were based on elements in Dörnyei's (2009) model and other theoretical constructs that were described in Section 2, inductive codes emerged organically from the data. As more understanding of the relationship between items developed, new categories were created and others were modified.

In this explanatory sequential design, the quantitative results were explained in more detail through the rich qualitative data. At strategic intervals (e.g., prior to the sojourn, post-sojourn) the statistical data were analyzed and triangulated with the qualitative codes and themes, and linked to relevant literature on L2 learning motivation and study abroad.

## 5. Results and discussion

The presentation and discussion of selected sojourn findings is divided into three parts. The first centers on the results of the post-sojourn questionnaire survey, with comparisons made to pre-sojourn findings, when relevant. The second part focuses on the qualitative data related to the sojourn, and the third part integrates the quantitative and qualitative findings. Due to space limitations only a portion of the data can be presented.

### 5.1 Quantitative results

#### 5.1.1 *Perceptions of sojourn gains*

In the post-sojourn questionnaire, the participants were asked to assess what they had gained from the semester-long sojourn. Drawing on previous study abroad research, they were provided with a list of potential gains and asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each, using the scale 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. They were also invited to add additional items that were not in the list. As Table 2 indicates, 'travelling and seeing many new places,' 'experiencing life in another culture,' and 'growth in maturity, independence and self-confidence' were cited as the top three gains. Prior to the sojourn, the enhancement of their English language proficiency was their second most important goal; however, it was only ranked tenth in the post-sojourn questionnaire, suggesting that their English language skills had not been enhanced as much as they had hoped. As they had anticipated, from their vantage point, the sojourn had not significantly enhanced their leadership skills or their knowledge and skills in their discipline.

**Table 2.** Perceptions of sojourn gains ( $N = 59$ )

The semester-long sojourn in an English-speaking country....	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Enabled me to travel and see many new places	4.54	0.77
Enabled me to experience life in another culture	4.51	0.75
Helped me become more mature, independent, and self-confident	4.47	0.78
Increased my ability to cope with / adapt to new situations	4.37	0.87
Was fun	4.32	0.88
Increased my understanding and appreciation of other peoples and cultures	4.29	0.79
Enabled me to make friends with people from other cultures	4.27	0.93
Enhanced my intercultural sensitivity (helped me become more open-minded)	4.27	0.85
Increased my desire to travel / work / study abroad in the future	4.22	1.08
Enhanced my proficiency in English	4.20	0.87
Increased my ability to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds	4.20	0.81
Increased my understanding of my own culture, identity, and values	4.19	1.00
Increased my level of comfort with people different from myself	4.17	0.91
Provided me with valuable experience for my future career	4.15	0.87
Increased my interpersonal skills (ability to relate to others)	4.14	0.90
Added diversity to my academic program (e.g. take courses not offered at CUHK)	4.14	0.88
Increased my appreciation of the study of foreign languages	4.12	0.98
Enhanced my critical thinking skills	4.08	0.93
Increased my understanding of international issues and events	3.98	0.94
Challenged me intellectually	3.97	0.95
Enhanced knowledge and skills in my discipline (major)	3.92	1.18
Enhanced my résumé and increased job opportunities	3.85	1.00
Helped me develop leadership skills	3.42	1.07

### 5.1.2 *Sojourn challenges*

In the post-sojourn questionnaire, the participants were asked to reveal what challenges they had faced during the sojourn. Similar to the pre-sojourn questionnaire, they were provided with a list of possibilities and asked to rank them in terms of their own experience. They could also add items that were not in the list. As Table 3 illustrates, as they had expected, a language barrier was the most serious obstacle they had faced in the host environment. Class participation and culture shock were also cited among the top three challenges, followed by managing finances, intercultural communication, and a heavy workload.

**Table 3.** The most challenging aspects of the sojourn ( $N = 59$ )

In the host environment, the greatest challenges that I faced were...	<i>f</i>	%
Language barrier	30	50.8
Participating in class (e.g., class discussions)	20	33.9
Coping with culture shock (adjusting to cultural difference)	19	32.2
Managing my finances	19	32.2
Interacting with people from other cultures	17	28.8
Heavy workload	14	23.7
Accommodation problems	14	23.7
Personal safety and security	10	16.9
Homesickness	10	16.9
Making friends with people from other cultures	7	11.9
Racial discrimination	5	8.5

### 5.1.3 *Language proficiency*

Similar to the pre-sojourn phase, in the post-sojourn questionnaire survey, the participants were asked to rate their proficiency in English using a five-point scale. This time, only 5 (8.5%) believed that their English was 'excellent'. 30 (50.8%) rated their proficiency as 'very good', 18 (30.5%) as 'good', and 6 (10.2%) as only 'fair'. None rated their English level as 'poor'. As Table 4 illustrates, in terms of particular skills in English, similar to the pre-sojourn ratings, they remained most confident in their reading skills, followed by their listening and writing abilities. Overall, they remained the least confident in their oral proficiency.

**Table 4.** Self-ratings of proficiency level in English ( $N = 59$ )

	Excellent (5)		Very good (4)		Good (3)		Fair (2)		Poor (1)		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%		
<b>Listening</b>	8	13.6	35	59.3	14	23.7	2	3.4	0	0	3.83	.70
<b>Speaking</b>	4	6.8	25	42.4	24	40.7	6	10.2	0	0	3.46	.77
<b>Reading</b>	16	27.1	35	59.3	7	11.9	1	1.7	0	0	4.12	.67
<b>Writing</b>	8	13.6	25	42.4	20	33.9	5	8.5	1	1.7	3.58	.89
<b>Overall</b>	5	8.5	30	50.8	18	30.5	6	10.2	0	0	3.58	.79

### 5.1.4 *Language use*

To get a sense of their English language usage outside of class, in the post-sojourn questionnaire, the participants were provided with a list of activities and asked to indicate the amount of time they spent doing each in English during the sojourn.

For this exercise, they employed the scale: 1 = never to 5 = daily. As Table 5 illustrates, similar to the pre-sojourn results, the most frequent activity was emailing. In the previous administration, this item had a mean of 4.09 ( $SD = 0.86$ ). Compared with their pre-sojourn use of English in Hong Kong, the participants interacted more frequently with L1 speakers in the host environment, as this item only had a mean of 3.03 ( $SD = 0.98$ ) in the pre-sojourn questionnaire survey results.

**Table 5.** Use of English outside of class during the sojourn ( $N = 59$ )

Activity	Mean	SD
E-mailing	3.61	0.79
Talking with first-language speakers	3.49	0.82
Listening to songs	2.86	1.25
Watching movies/videos/DVDs	2.69	1.04
Reading newspapers	2.03	1.12
Reading magazines	1.92	1.19
Watching television	1.68	1.41
Reading novels	1.64	1.23
Volunteering	1.22	1.34
Internship	0.93	1.54

## 5.2 Qualitative results

In-depth interviews ( $N = 30$ ) and responses to email prompts during the sojourn ( $N = 10$ ) helped to better understand the survey findings. In particular, the qualitative data facilitated the identification of individual differences and environmental factors that led to divergent outcomes. As space is limited, discussion centers on the analysis of the interview transcripts.

### 5.2.1 *Perceptions of English language proficiency, self-efficacy, and WTC*

During the sojourn, some of the interviewees became more confident when using English, which they attributed to increased exposure to the language in daily life and the pressure to participate in interactive class discussions. Several stated that they initiated conversations in English and developed close intercultural friendships. More invested in language learning, these individuals took better advantage of affordances in the community and drew closer to their 'ideal L2 self'.

Most of the students in my classes were native speakers of English and this was quite useful. They spoke English all the time so I didn't have to spend extra time

watching TV dramas to pick up the language. My listening comprehension is better so I enjoy the shows more. (S14)

Compared with the past, my English has certainly improved. Before living in Canada, I needed to think about what I wanted to say and plan my speech carefully beforehand, but now I can express my views spontaneously. I can use English quite naturally and fluently. (S22)

In the beginning, I didn't participate in class discussions but by the end of the semester I contributed some ideas and asked more questions. I gradually became more comfortable and confident when speaking English. Having many chances to use the language in daily life made a big difference. (S29)

While some students linked gains in their English language proficiency and self-efficacy to interactions with L1 speakers, others stressed the benefit of using the language with other international students who were also L2 speakers. These interactions helped them to become more self-assured when using English, although they were still not fully at ease when communicating with L1 speakers.

Speaking with native speakers helped me a lot in terms of improving my listening ability but I wasn't brave or courageous enough to speak in front of them. In these situations, I was mostly a listener and only occasionally spoke a few sentences. My oral ability was improved more through talking with non-native speakers. In a group project, my group mates were all international students, including a Romanian, an Italian, and a Korean, and when we spoke English, we could understand each other. Chatting with non-native speakers was more comfortable than talking with native speakers. (S1)

Not all of the interviewees were satisfied with their English language proficiency after their semester abroad. In an English-speaking environment, some had become more aware of gaps in their proficiency. Several also conceded that they had made little effort to seek out opportunities to use the language. Significantly, these individuals were not able to identify any strategies that they had used to enhance their language and culture learning.

My English improved a bit but I still haven't reached the level where I feel very confident. There's still room for improvement. I discovered that I'm not as proficient as I thought I was. It was quite difficult for me to express my thoughts in a concise and accurate manner both in writing and in speaking. (S18)

In Canada, I didn't use any particular strategies to enhance my English. I just didn't think about it. My English level is the same as it was before I went abroad. (S25)

S1 berated his self-efficacy and proficiency level in English. Interestingly, even though he had sojourned in an English-speaking community, he commented that there were few opportunities to use the language in the host environment. His social circle largely consisted of other Mainland Chinese students, and his out-of-class communication was mostly in Putonghua.

Even after this exchange experience, I'm not proficient in English. I really wanted to improve but I just wasn't diligent enough. Anyway, I had enough English for basic communication and there weren't many opportunities in the University to use English so I just let it be. As for fluency, it's more or less the same. I don't have problems with that unless there's a specific topic for the discussion and I don't have enough vocabulary. I also still find it difficult to express my feelings and ideas. In Canada, I noticed that international students who were not fluent in English still spoke with confidence but I never felt really confident when talking with native speakers. That never changed. (S1)

While some of their fellow interviewees felt that they had benefited by being in classes with L1 speakers, others were intimidated by fast-paced discussions and lectures in English. Feeling under pressure, their confidence level dissipated and they withdrew to the safety of co-nationals.

I wasn't confident enough in my English, especially when there were a lot of native speakers around. My lack of confidence held me back and I often missed the opportunity to speak especially when the discussions were very fast-paced. Even at the end of the semester, I didn't volunteer to answer questions. If I could do the sojourn all over again, I'd participate more and not be so worried about making mistakes in English or saying something dumb. If I'd been less worried about losing face I'd have gained more practice in English and my English would be better. (S7)

My English still isn't very good. The American lecturers spoke English very fast and sometimes, I couldn't follow what they said. Also, native speakers were in the majority in my classes and they tended to speak really fast so I felt pressured. Sometimes, I couldn't understand what was happening. (S23)

Trying to function in English on a daily basis took a heavy toll on some. For example, a Social Science major who sojourned in the U.S., vividly recounted the psychological stress that he endured abroad. His negative mindset and elevated stress level curtailed his level of engagement in the host environment and subsequently limited his English language learning.

Before going abroad, I loved watching American TV series, and even felt very happy listening to English in my classes. I really wanted to improve my proficiency, but when I went to America something strange happened. Surrounded

by English, I hoped to hear some Chinese! I just felt overloaded. It wasn't that I couldn't understand, but when I noticed that all of the TV programs were in English, I began to feel that America is too conservative and closes off input from other countries so I didn't have the mood to listen to English nor did I feel like listening to English songs or reading English novels. It was already too much for me. I began to think that the English language has no sense of beauty. Now, that I'm back in China, my enthusiasm for English has come back a little. (S4)

### 5.2.2 *Social networks, host receptivity, and English language usage / proficiency*

Nearly all of the interviewees had hoped to make friends with host nationals as well as international exchange students from other parts of the world; however, most did not diversify their social network. A language barrier was cited as the primary reason, followed by cultural differences and limited common interests.

It was very difficult to make friends with people from other cultures. We didn't have common topics for conversations and language was a barrier. In a second language, it's difficult to chat about deeper and more personal matters. I tried to understand the English of one of the international students, but to no avail. He talked happily but I could barely understand a word he said. The indifferent attitude of the foreigners also made me uncomfortable. I wanted to build a friendship with them but they didn't seem to care whether we became friends or not... Perhaps if I'd been abroad before and if my English had been better, maybe I could have had more things to talk about and would have been able to make friends with the locals as well as other international students. (S6)

When trying to make friends with foreigners, language was a barrier and we didn't share many interests. The locals liked partying, drinking, dancing and American football so there were not many common topics for us to talk about. That's why I didn't spend as much time with them as I'd expected to. (S13)

It was harder to make friends with British people than with people from my own culture. We had less to talk about and they spoke too fast. It was hard to catch their meaning. (S18)

A few of the interviewees stated that Chinese people were discriminated against in the host environment and, not surprisingly, this reduced their willingness to develop intercultural relationships, which, in turn, limited their exposure to English outside class.

I felt that the Chinese were discriminated against and this made me less willing to interact with locals. They didn't seem to like Asians very much, and I sensed that they didn't like talking with us. After a few sentences they would not make any effort to continue with the conversation, which lessened my motivation to talk with them. Some even totally ignored you. (S16)



In the International Business class, it was clear that the locals thought that Chinese people are reserved, have a conservative mind, and are not very open-minded. They even believed that China was still under autocracy, like the situation way back in history. These kinds of misunderstandings made me feel a bit uncomfortable and less interested in communicating with them. (S25)

Although most of the interviewees found it difficult to establish meaningful intercultural friendships, especially with host nationals, some persevered and overcame language and cultural barriers. By the end of the sojourn, these individuals appeared to appreciate the bonds that they had formed. The time spent with their new friends also provided valuable opportunities for the use of informal English in social situations.

It wasn't easy to make friends with people from other cultures, especially with the locals. We couldn't understand each other well due to a language barrier and differences in our cultural background. At first, I didn't know what to chat with my roommates about and, much of the time I had no clue what they were talking about. It got better after we spent some time together and shared some of our experiences. Gradually, we had more topics to talk about. They love to gossip, and I told my stories and shared my feelings and they did the same. It was the first time for me to use English informally like this. (S15)

Language can make it difficult to build relationships with locals. They speak more and more quickly as they get more and more excited. Inevitably, there are other barriers due to culture and communication styles, but if you don't communicate, the barrier will exist forever so you just have to ask questions when you don't understand something. Gradually, you'll figure out the source of the confusion and communication problems will become less. (S8)

I'm quite outgoing and talkative so people like to make friends with me. Even so, I still encountered obstacles, like a language barrier. I couldn't fully express my feelings and views in English. I could think very deeply about something but wasn't able to explain my ideas. Maybe there were also cultural differences but, in my view, the main difficulty was language. For example, the Americans would talk about some scenes in movies but I found it challenging to understand and share my views as my vocabulary wasn't good enough. Even so, they were quite patient and willing to try to explain things to me. Gradually, I was able to become friends with some of them. (S27)

Although nearly all of the participants found it challenging to break into the social circles of local students, some discovered that shared experiences drew them closer to international exchange students from Asia and other parts of the world. As English was usually the lingua franca for their interactions, this afforded them more opportunities to use the language.

It wasn't necessarily easier to communicate with international students than local students, but we did have more to talk about as we shared some similar experiences as we were all newcomers. Also, we had a stronger desire for intercultural communication and were more willing to communicate with each other. As for my local roommates, we didn't have many deep topics to talk with each other about. (S11)

I spent most of my time with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students. Sometimes, I also did some things with two French students. Except when I was alone with my Chinese friends, I used English to communicate so I got a lot more practice using the language in social situations than I'd ever had before. (S21)

While some of the interviewees focused on the obstacles that they had faced in the host environment, several expressed appreciation for the warm welcome they had received. Finding their hosts receptive, these individuals gained more access to diverse settings and activities, and more exposure to English.

It was easy to make new friends because most of them were very welcoming. They were very sociable and tried to make us feel at home. (S14)

Interacting with locals gave me more chances to use English and also improved my cultural knowledge. The people were nice and I felt satisfied with the friendships that I formed. If I could go back to this period again, I wouldn't change anything. (S28)

I'm satisfied with the relationships that I developed in the U.K. Although I didn't make friends with many people, I managed to establish a close relationship with some locals in my dorm, and also got quite close with some international students in my classes. I'm quite happy about it. (S17)

The participants who developed close intercultural relationships and used the host language more often in their daily life generally had fewer regrets about the choices they had made during the sojourn.

### 5.2.3 *Attitudes towards English*

The participants' attitudes towards English evolved during the course of this study. Prior to the sojourn, nearly all viewed the language as a necessary tool for academic and professional advancement and were primarily concerned with what Dörnyei (2009) terms 'ought-to L2 selves'. Living in an English-speaking environment heightened their awareness of the positioning of English as an important global language and more of the participants began to view the language as a means to facilitate communication with people in other parts of the world.

English is a very good language that's easy to learn, and it's useful for intercultural communication. When you meet people from different countries, they can often speak English and it helps if you can communicate with them in this language. (S20)

English is the best medium for communication with people who have different backgrounds as it's impossible to know all of the languages in the world. If you can speak English well you won't have any problems communicating with international friends. After the exchange experience, I certainly regard English as more important. (S24)

Before the sojourn, I thought English was important because everyone said so, but now I have truly experienced its importance. If you didn't know how to speak English there, you wouldn't understand what the people around you were saying. (S30)

By the end of the semester in an English-speaking environment, those who had met with success when using the language in social situations tended to feel closer to and more appreciative of the language. Instead of viewing English merely as a 'tool' for academic enhancement, they began to recognize the social and cultural dimensions of the language.

I feel closer to English now. Before I only used it academically, but after using it on a daily basis in America, I view it as a language to use to communicate with others. (S2)

My feelings about English have changed. They're now very positive. English is a language for communication. It's not very complicated and sounds quite pleasant. In secondary school I just treated English as a subject which had many words and grammar rules to memorize. I feel a bit closer to it now and believe that it's a very useful tool. It's necessary to study it well. (S15)

After living in England for four months, I developed a more intimate connection to English. (S17)

My views about English changed a little after studying in the U.S. as I began to appreciate it more. Previously I used English primarily to acquire scientific knowledge, but now I realize that it can be helpful for communication purposes. It can help to build friendships with people from other cultures. (S29)

In contrast, individuals who found it difficult to function in English on a daily basis were less engaged in the host environment and remained ambivalent or even negative about the language after their return to Hong Kong.

I don't have any special attachment to English. It's just a Germanic language. I just feel that I'm lucky that I know how to speak English so that I can

communicate with people from other places, but I don't have any special feelings about the language. (S6)

I'm partially to blame for not being able to understand the English spoken by Americans. I think psychologically I automatically reject English that has a strong accent. The more I find it hard to understand, the more I don't want to listen, and the more I don't understand. I know English is very important and we have to master it, but that doesn't mean that I like it. (S16)

#### 5.2.4 *Motivation to further enhance English language proficiency*

Back in Hong Kong, the interviewees reflected on the impact of the sojourn on their motivation to further enhance their English language proficiency. While there were significant differences in their attitudes towards the language, nearly all professed the desire to become more proficient, albeit for diverse reasons. Most stressed the pragmatic benefits of a higher proficiency in English (e.g., postgraduate studies or work abroad, a higher-paying job). Revelations like the following resonate with Dörnyei's (2009) notion of the 'ought-to L2 self', which is thought to be less internalized than the 'ideal L2 self'.

I think it's very important to learn English. When your English is good, you have more chances to do postgraduate studies abroad. You might even be able to work abroad. (S5)

I didn't make much of an effort to improve my English when I was on exchange but now I really feel the need to learn English to get a good job and think it would be tragic if I don't learn it well. (S10)

Other returnees demonstrated more awareness of the benefits of developing their language skills in English to enhance their communication with people from other backgrounds both at home and abroad.

I'm now more motivated to improve my English and try to seize opportunities to enhance my proficiency. Learning a language well can be really useful. When you interact with others, speaking a language well or badly gives them two completely different impressions. If one speaks a language well, one can have closer or more intimate relationships with others. (S12)

After studying in the U.S., I've become very motivated to learn English for communication purposes. Now I'm trying to enhance my proficiency by watching movies and TV series. (S19)

I'm more confident when using English and more motivated to use it. Now, whenever I encounter foreign exchange students, I chat with them. Some of my courses are conducted in English and I'm very proactive in them, more than I was before

the exchange program. When I do final presentations now, I carefully prepare my script and recite it because I want to make my presentation perfect. (S30)

With a higher level of self-efficacy and self-confidence when using English, they had moved closer to their 'ideal L2 self'. More willing to interact with international exchange students on campus, their social circles had become more diverse. Some had even begun to initiate conversations in English, which they had never done prior to studying abroad. In accord with the University's internationalization aims, these returnees were more determined to become fluent in English and enhance their intercultural communication skills. As noted by Dörnyei (2009) in his explanation of the L2 Motivational Self-System, perceptions of one's 'ideal L2 self' can compel language learners to devote more energy to language learning. As this study suggests, these images can be a powerful source of motivation for L2 enhancement and the cultivation of intercultural relationships.

### 5.3 Integrated consideration of quantitative and qualitative results

As well as furnishing essential demographic information, the quantitative data yielded some interesting findings. While the participants had set English language learning enhancement as a key goal prior to venturing abroad, most were not fully convinced that they had made sufficient progress in this area. In particular, many still lacked confidence in their oral skills after the sojourn. The post-sojourn questionnaire results revealed that many experienced a language barrier in the host environment and this had stymied their adjustment and intercultural learning. Although their semester abroad had taken place in an English-speaking environment, their most frequent use of the language outside of class was emailing, as it had been in Hong Kong prior to the sojourn. In relation to language and intercultural learning, this finding raised some doubts about the benefits of the sojourn.

The qualitative data provided much-needed insight into barriers to language and intercultural learning as well as facilitating factors. In particular, a review of the interview transcripts helped to identify and explain individual differences that led to dissimilar sojourn outcomes. Differences in sojourn aims, language attitudes, self-efficacy in English, degree of openness towards other 'ways of being', the depth of motivation and investment in language and culture learning, the degree of acculturative stress and coping mechanisms, personality traits, use of language and culture learning strategies, and agency resulted in variations in the quality and amount of exposure to the host language and culture. This, in turn, resulted in differences in developmental trajectories.

Some of the exchange students perceived their hosts to be welcoming and patient, and this encouraged them to join activities, which afforded them more

exposure to the host language and culture in diverse settings. As they grew in self-confidence when using English, they developed a more positive attitude toward the language, which, in turn, prompted a deeper investment in language enhancement and propelled them closer to their 'ideal L2 self' (Dörnyei, 2009).

In stark contrast, some sojourners felt marginalized by locals who spoke very fast in English and made little or no effort to include them in their social networks. A few interviewees felt that locals discriminated against Chinese people and, not surprisingly, this limited their willingness to engage. Negative perceptions reduced the amount of contact that these sojourners had with the host language and culture, curtailing their learning (e.g., limiting growth in their listening skills, oral proficiency, and intercultural competence). The integration of the quantitative and qualitative data helped to make sense of and elaborate on the quantitative results to enrich understanding of the complexity of L2 learning motivation.

## 6. Conclusions and implications

As befits a mixed methods study with an explanatory design, the qualitative data enriched and expanded on the quantitative results and helped to create a fuller picture of the learning situation than would have been possible with only a single type of data. In addition to a range of complex individual differences, environmental factors and extralinguistic variables affected attitudes towards L2 learning / use and significantly impacted the way the sojourns unfolded. As suggested by Dörnyei's (2009) process-oriented model of L2 motivation, the present study found that the context and situation-specific motives related to the learning environment can influence L2 learning motivation as well as idealized images of oneself as a proficient (or deficient) L2 user. As well as host receptivity, self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1994, Mills, 2014), language attitudes (Garrett, 2010), and self-esteem (Rubio, 2014) in relation to WTC (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 1998) were found to be influential factors with regard to language and intercultural learning.

Clearly benefiting from the exchange program, some of the exchange students enhanced their proficiency in English through interactions with locals or, more frequently, with other international students. In the process, these individuals developed more sociopragmatic awareness and intercultural sensitivity, and became more willing to engage in intercultural interactions both at home and abroad. As this mixed methods study reveals, however, L2 sojourners may not necessarily be immersed in the host environment. Instead of gaining ample first-hand exposure to the host language and culture, they may spend much of their free time

conversing in their L1 with co-nationals, and return home with little or no gains in L2 proficiency and intercultural sensitivity.

The findings underscore the idiosyncratic nature of study abroad (Coleman, 2013; Jackson, 2012) and emphasize the need to encourage realistic goal-setting in pre-sojourn orientations. In these sessions, it is also important to draw attention to the benefits of using language and culture learning strategies to enhance learning in the host environment. Returnees who were successful language and culture learners could be encouraged to share their stories and strategies in pre-sojourn sessions. In these orientations, outgoing international exchange students could also be prompted to take fuller advantage of opportunities to gain L2, intercultural experience prior to arriving in the host country.

The study also has implications for receiving institutions. The students in the present study appreciated the orientations that were arranged by their hosts but felt segregated. As well as including more local students in welcoming activities, host institutions could arrange 'buddy schemes', whereby interested local and international students are linked together for the semester (Office of Academic Links, n.d.). Initiatives like this have the potential to benefit both newcomers and local students, and can help institutions achieve the aims of internationalization. Increasing the number of international students on campus is not enough.

Finally, it is important to recognize the merits of working with returning exchange students to help them consolidate their international learning and set realistic goals for further personal expansion (e.g., linguistic, cultural, academic, professional) (e.g., Jackson, 2012, 2015b). At present, few institutions have developed programs or courses for returnees and valuable opportunities for learning are lost. In sum, research-guided interventions may be needed to fully optimize the learning of student sojourners both in their home environment and abroad.

## **7. Limitations of study and directions for future research**

The study presented here centered on the perceptions and experiences of Chinese international exchange students, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data in an explanatory sequential mixed methods study. While introspective data can offer valuable insight into the personal, sociocultural, linguistic, and academic development of student sojourners, care must be taken when interpreting sojourner stories as first-person accounts may not be fully accurate or complete due to the limitations of memory and other factors (Pavlenko, 2007).

More studies are needed that track shifts in the language attitudes and motivations of L2 students both in their home environment and abroad. As well as large-scale mixed methods studies, rich case studies or ethnographies that center

on a small number of participants could deepen our awareness of the internal and external elements that impact the use of particular language and culture learning strategies. The findings could help to inform pre-sojourn orientations for L2 sojourners, offer direction for their support in the host environment, and provide guidance for re-entry programming. Ultimately, better understanding the conditions that enhance (or inhibit) language and culture learning can lead to more effective study abroad practices, including the design and development of innovative, courses for student sojourners (e.g., language enhancement, intercultural communication, intercultural transition).

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