

Chapter 89

Perspectives on Mediated L2 Learning During Study Abroad: Identity, Motivation, and Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Informed by multiple sociocultural and sociolinguistic conceptual frameworks that highlight the compelling implication of identity, motivation, and mediation in second language (L2) learning, this chapter examines how the sense of self and aspirations of multiple Chinese students have affected their strategies in L2 experiences during study abroad in the United States (US). Data sources included in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations, focus group discussion, social media posts and other documents. Within the specific study abroad context under discussion, substantial data from three focal participants divulged that multiple identities, self-positioning in imagined communities and motivation interacted with each other in mediating L2 learners' experience and investment selections. In other words, their feelings, sense of self and envisioned learning goals influenced and mediated their attitude and strategies in interacting with others.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization, economic development and easier transportation have led to an increasing number of study abroad programs serving millions of students. China is the top country that sends most international students to the US. In 2014, China retained its leading place as sender of approximately 274,439 students to the US for academic degrees, taking up over one-quarter of the total international students' enrollment in the US (IIE, 2014). The popularity of study abroad is also reflected in the increasing amount of scholarship in this field. The benefits and challenges in study abroad have been discussed for decades. While some scholars have argued that study abroad leads to linguistic gains, increased cultural competence and other communicative skills (i.e., Carlson, Burn, Useem & Yachimowitz, 1991; McCabe,

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1994; Milstein, 2005); other researchers evidence that study abroad proposes risks in anxiety and varies in results depending on the context and individual differences (e.g., Barron, 2006).

Amid the substantial studies to explore the advantages and disadvantages of study abroad and to assess the effectiveness of programs, however, language learning during study abroad is researched in a measurable quantitative sphere. These measurable language gains include overall language proficiency (i.e., Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1993; Freed, 1998; Lindseth, 2010), nuanced growth in diverse linguistic aspects (i.e., Bretch et al., 1993; Kinginger, 2008; Lafford, 1995) and comparing linguistic gains across contexts (i.e., Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004). A large amount of the existing scholarship is 'highly product-oriented, focusing on the measurable advances students [made] in language proficiency and linguistic knowledge while abroad' (Pellegrino, 1998, p. 91).

Although previous studies have generated significant insights in the field, a missing piece is the participants' own perspectives of their study abroad process. In recent decades, increasing scholars shifted their questions from what knowledge is learned to how knowledge is learned and why it is learned in a certain way. To unravel the learning process, scholars find the point of departure in learners themselves: their identity, motivation and strategies. For instance, Haneda (2005) explored the relationship between L2 learners' participation in class and their desires; Chang (2011) evidenced the importance of considering students' past histories and imagined community when studying their academic journey during study abroad through two doctoral students' L2 experience. Gaining in-depth understanding of each person's story will be a powerful tool to understand why this person learns the L2 in a certain way. Scholars continue to call for more light shed on the process of learning from the students' point of view.

Multiple conceptual frameworks lend support on seeking answers for such questions as *who you are*, *why you learn* and *how you learn*. Norton's (1995, 1997, 2000, 2014) identity and investment capture L2 learners' multiple and sometimes ambivalent desires to learn and practice languages. In addition, the notion of motivation is developed in a broader scope to explain how L2 self may influence learners' selection of strategies (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005; Ortega, 2009). Moreover, mediation in sociocultural theory explicates the social and cultural sources of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). In other words, learning does not occur isolate within a person's mind; instead, learning is mediated by other objects, people or symbolic resources, including a sense of self and motivation. These three conceptual frameworks intertwine to inform this study. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the L2 experiences of international students from China by exploring the roles of identity and motivation in informing their strategies. Through these case studies, this chapter aims to display multiple perspectives on L2 experience from the international students' own lenses. The analyses of findings demonstrate that despite the similar cultural backgrounds, L2 learners exert their agency to select their strategies in social and academic environment. Their interaction with others is influenced by their identity, past histories, language proficiency and envisioned future community. As a result, their selected investment in return contributes to their L2 identity formation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Study abroad is a significant context for language learning because it is a 'hybrid communicative-learning context' (Collentine & Freed, 2004, p. 156) where students experience both formal classroom instructions and social interaction. It is an important context to view students' cultural learning because it is outside the comfort zone where students may experience their identities being questioned, worldviews

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