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2014

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Introduction

It has been assumed that study abroad provides an ideal environment for foreign language learners to receive various types of language input, which leads to effortless and osmotic linguistic and cultural development. Many educators and researchers believe students should be completely immersed in the target language context by interacting with native speakers as much as possible since the first day of studying abroad regardless of their prior language learning experience (Lafford, 1995; Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1995). At the minimum, they should speak the target language the moment they step upon the soil of the sojourn country. However, there exist serious inconsistencies among research studies on what results in students' successful linguistic and cultural development in study abroad. One line of research that has gained much attention in recent years focuses on the formal and informal social interaction students have with local communities (e.g. Isabelli-Garcia, 2006; Levin, 2001; Magnan & Back, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998). Some second language (L2) researchers (e.g. Kinginger, 2008, 2009; Ochs, 2002) propose viewing L2 development in study abroad as a language socialization process, similar to how children engage in their first language (L1) environment. In other words, students in study abroad contexts are assumed to strive to be socialized into the target culture by learning the socially acceptable language behaviors through interaction with the local residents. However, whether the students are ready to be socialized into the target culture and whether native speakers of the target culture are willing to provide appropriate linguistic and cultural assistance to help socialize the learners into the target culture are open to questions.

Recent years have witnessed a rapidly surging number of American students studying abroad in China. Many of them go with an assumption that their language proficiency will inevitably improve once they live in China and are surrounded by Chinese-speaking people. On the other hand, it is still an uncharted area in second language acquisition of Chinese (SLAC) whether Chinese people, historically mono-cultural, particularly the people with whom American study abroad students interact on a daily basis, are ready or willing to provide a learning-conducive social environment. There is an urgent need to provide educators and students involved in study abroad programs with an appropriate understanding of and guidance for how to optimally take advantage of the formal and informal learning resources available in study abroad programs. Peer interaction, despite the undisputed learning conduciveness discovered in foreign language learning settings (e.g. Donato, 1994; Ohta, 1995; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Watanabe & Swain, 2007), is still a largely neglected topic in study abroad research due to the aforementioned assumptions. This chapter reports on an empirical study on how college-level American students used and perceived peer/group interaction as a way of learning in a summer intensive language study abroad program. By peer/group interaction, the author specifically means in this study the one-on-one or group interaction in either L1 or L2 between American learners in and outside their classrooms.

Literature Review

SLA researchers (e.g., Kramsch, 2000; van Lier, 2004) caution that language learning is a rather complex process and language educators and researchers should avoid conflating foreign language learning as a merely linguistic development process. Compared to foreign language classrooms, the context of study abroad is inherently much more complex and unpredictable. This section reviews previous second language acquisition (SLA) research on peer interaction

and relevant theoretical propositions such as language socialization, language (L1 and L2) and identity, which will be drawn on to help understand how informal interactions with L1 peers may or may not shape the language development of American learners of Mandarin Chinese in a study abroad context and how these learners view the process.

Peer Interaction in SLA

In cognitivist SLA theories (e.g., Doughty & Long, 2003), L2 knowledge is perceived as transit linearly from an expert of the language, preferably a native speaker, to a novice learner through meaningful interaction so that comprehensible input is up-taken and eventually imitated by the learner. From the perspective of sociocultural theory (SCT) (Vygotsky, 1978), learning originates and is co-constructed in dynamic and mediated social interaction in which the novice learner is an active rather than passive agent who actively controls how to engage in learning activities. Although earlier SCT researchers emphasize asymmetrical learning in expert-novice collaboration, SLA researchers (e.g. Donato, 1994) have discovered in the mid 1990s that both lower and higher-level learners in symmetrical interaction could obtain language gains through their collaboration. In other words, learners who work with lower-level peers can also benefit from collaborative learning activities. Recent years have witnessed more research studies investigating the nature and impact of peer interaction in L2 learning process and product.

One line of research that explores the nature of peer interaction in L2 learning is found in Storch's studies (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002) which distinguish two dimensions of dyadic interaction: equality (i.e. authority over the task) and mutuality (i.e. level of engagement in the task). Four distinct peer interaction patterns are uncovered: collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, and expert/novice. Storch (2002) asserts that peer interaction among collaborative and expert/novice dyads is more conducive to language learning. Reviewing

empirical studies on the impact of peer interaction on L2 learners' development in writing, speaking, listening, and reading skills, Swain, Brooks, and Tocalli-Beller (2002) conclude that peer-peer collaborative dialogue has positive impact on L2 learners' language learning regardless of their respective proficiency level because learners adopting a collaborative orientation co-construct the language and provide scaffolding support to each other. In particular, during collaborative dialogues, the higher proficient learner can improve his or her phonology, syntax, and lexis by repeating or recycling the performance in front of different listeners even if the lower proficient learner does not provide particular assistance. A later study (Watanabe & Swain, 2007) further uncovers that learners' proficiency level does not necessarily affect the patterns of peer collaboration and results of language learning. In other words, how collaborative peer interaction can be and how it impacts on the learning are not significantly related to whether learners obtain support from a higher-level performer or a native speaker of the target language. This further confirms that peer interaction can provide as much support as the interaction with native speakers of the target language for language development.

Identity and L1 Use in L2 Learning Settings

Another line of SLA research (e.g., Belz, 2002; Kramsch, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) analyzes second language learning as a process of learner identity formation, contestation and transitioning. From this view, language is used as both a communicative and a cognitive tool that provides an additional set of semiotic repertoire, consequently a different lens through which to view the world. L2 learners are perceived as "agents whose actions are situated in particular contexts and influenced by their dynamic ethnic, national, gender, class, and social identities" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p.155). Acquiring a L2 is equal to acquiring a new tool that may reframe the learner's views and a new voice for the learner to express him or herself through his

or her selection of certain words and meanings over others. Thus, through the language learning process, a new self, hopefully a bilingual and bicultural one emerges.

Under this theoretical framework, the goal of foreign or second language learning is to become a “multicompetent language user” (Cook, 1995). In other words, L2 learners should not be viewed as deficient L2 language users who are always inferior to native speakers of the target language. Rather, they are acquiring a new set of competences including different cognitive processes in a different language in addition to their native language, which renders them completely different from monolingual individuals. Aligning with this line of thought, Kramsch (2004) emphasizes that L2 learners are constructing a “third space” at the intersection of several identities and subjectivities through language rather than seeking to be completely assimilated into the target culture. Belz (2002) pinpoints that L1 use in a L2 learning environment should not be viewed as language deficiency. Instead, the use of multiple languages should be the representations of multiple speaker identities. In certain situations, systematic and well-thought L1 use is even considered as an affective and creative tool that facilitates rather than hinders L2 development (Cook, 2001; van Lier, 2004). For example, learners may feel more comfortable with certain functions or topics in L1 rather than L2. Thus, it is suggested that foreign or second language educators consider L2 learning as an identity (re)configuration process (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), and L1 use should not be avoided at all costs.

L2 Socialization and Study Abroad

The surging number of students participating in study abroad programs has attracted increasing attention to L2 learning in various study abroad contexts. One intriguing theory on L2 study abroad research is language socialization (Ochs, 2002) which is derived from theories on L1 children’s language socialization in their native culture. Analogizing L2 learners to L1

children who strive to be socialized in their native community through acquiring appropriate language use, L2 researchers (e.g. Kinginger, 2008; Iino, 2006; Siegal, 1996) are interested in understanding how L2 learners experience various opportunities through language use that are believed to be authentic and natural to be accepted into the host community.

Disappointingly, existing study abroad studies yield more controversial than concerted findings in terms of what contributes to successful language learning in a study abroad context. However, one widely accepted consensus (e.g. Kinginger, 2008) is that L2 learners' language gains from studying abroad depend not only on how they are accepted in the host community, but also on how they opt to position themselves in these communities or on their agency as called by van Lier (2004). In other words, whether both the host community members and the learners are willing or ready to socialize the learners into one or more L2 communities may affect the qualities of social interactions, which is consequential to the success in language learning in study abroad. Although the theory of language socialization is mainly used to explain home-stay L2 learners' language learning in a sojourn, it provides an instrumental approach to understanding how native speakers' efforts to socialize L2 learners and L2 learners' stance toward being socialized into the host community intertwiningly influence this identity reconfiguration process regardless of the study abroad contexts.

It is widely acknowledged that study abroad entails a very complex L2 learning environment comprised with a myriad of social, cultural, and individual factors intertwiningly shaping the learning process. A focus on either the social cultural factors or on learners' psychological styles alone would yield a one-sided understanding of this complex process. Currently, due to logistical issues and programming concerns, many American students studying abroad in China are enrolled in summer intensive programs that require students to share rooms

with another American peer, and are therefore not fully immersed in the local Chinese language environment. Despite the increasing recognition of learning conduciveness of peer interaction in a foreign language learning context, maximum elimination of L1 peer interaction is still a widely preferred pedagogical strategy. Inspired by relevant SCT theoretical constructs such as identity, agency, and language socialization, this study aims to understand how American learners of Mandarin Chinese interact with their American peers in L1 or L2 in a study abroad program and how they perceive the interaction in their language learning. Considering the situation that students inevitably have both one-on-one interaction and group interaction in a study abroad program, the current study investigated peer interaction behaviors in both dyadic and group interactive activities. Two specific questions guided the research:

1. How do American learners of Mandarin Chinese interact with their peers in L1 or L2 throughout the study abroad program?
2. How do American learners of Mandarin Chinese perceive the role of peer/group interaction in their Mandarin Chinese learning during the study abroad program?

The Study

Study Context and Participants

The current study, which is part of a larger-scale study, was conducted in the summer of 2010 in an eight-week intensive language program hosted in a prestigious university in Shanghai (seven weeks of intensive formal language instruction in Shanghai and 1 week of tour in Beijing). A total of twelve students attended this program. Each student was required to have at least one year of prior Chinese language learning before going abroad. Before their departure, they were also required to take a cultural preparation course (a total of twenty-one hours of class contact time) to develop a basic understanding of modern Chinese society, such as the diversity of social

and linguistic norms in various regions of modern China and how modern Chinese people view gender issues, etc. After joining the Shanghai program which spanned from late June to early August, 2010, students were divided into two classes, the 2nd-year class (5 students), which was for students who had finished one year of Chinese learning in the U.S., and the 3rd-year class (6 students) for those who had finished two years of Chinese in the U.S. One student who had already finished three years of Chinese at the home university was placed in the 3rd-year class but was provided with additional instruction with a different textbook outside the normal class time. Thus, the 3rd-year class ended up with seven students. From Monday through Thursday, each class met for three grammar sessions (45 minutes per session) in which a professor from the host institution would go through the texts in the textbook and explain important grammatical structures. In the afternoon, each class participated in two language practicum sessions (45 minutes per session) in which a graduate student from the host institution organized various speaking and writing in-class activities and helped students practice what they'd learned in the morning. All the professors and graduate teaching assistants were native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. Each student in the program was assigned with a native Chinese tutor. Every weekday after all classroom-based sessions, students met with their tutors individually for one hour to practice freely speaking Chinese or discuss cultural issues depending on their own interest. All the classroom-based instruction ended by 3:10pm every weekday. Every Friday morning was a review and test session in which students were examined for their weekly syntactical and lexical gains in spoken and written Chinese. The entire group met with the program director for a group dinner every Friday evening. The group also made three one- or two-day group trips in the vicinity area on some weekends.

All students in this program stayed in an off-campus hotel which is located in a commercial district in western Shanghai and is within 20 minutes' walking distance from the university campus. All except one male and one female student shared the room with another same-gender student in the program. All rooms were physically adjacent to each other on the 8th floor, the top one, of the hotel building where other guests rarely resided. Due to the location of the hotel, half of the students purchased bikes to commute between the campus and the hotel after one week in the program. The other half walked to campus every day. The hotel also provided continental breakfast every morning. Because of the class structure and the hotel room arrangements, students in this program had ample time to interact with each other in the weekday evenings and on weekends.

The researcher was the program director of the summer program. During the eight weeks in China, she was mainly handling the logistic issues in the program besides conducting the study. The participants were recruited once they were accepted into the program in the spring of 2010. 11 out of the 12 students participated in the study. Participants voluntarily participated in the study and were allowed to withdraw from the study anytime during the study period.

As shown in Appendix A, five of the participants were female, including two Asian Americans, two Caucasians, and one half-Asian-and-half-Caucasian. Six were male, including one Asian, four Caucasians, and one half-Asian-and-half-Caucasian. All participants were between 18-21 years old at the time of the study: five were enrolled in the 2nd-year class and six in the 3rd-year class. Among the three Asian American participants, two were Cantonese heritage learners whose proficiency in literary Mandarin Chinese was similar to those non-Asian participants although their speaking skills were slightly better than their non-Asian peers'. They both reported that they had visited relatives or family in Hong Kong and Guangzhou a few times

before this trip. The other Asian-American participant was a Mandarin heritage learner whose conversational and literary proficiency was better than the entire group as she had finished three years of classes before the trip and had been visiting families in Beijing in summer breaks. One Caucasian student visited China on a two-week tour 3 years ago but had minimum communication with the local people on the tour. All other participants had been in China once. Both half-Asian-and-half-Caucasian participants had minimum exposure to Chinese language and culture at home.

Data Collection and Analysis

A case study approach was adopted in this study. Qualitative data were collected from a pre-study survey, weekly interviews, informal observations, and participants' weekly reflective journals. The pre-study survey (see Appendix B) was administered at the beginning of the study to understand each participant's demographic background, prior experience with Chinese language learning, and their goals in this study abroad program. A weekly 15~20-minute semi-structured interview (see Appendix C for sample interview questions), the primary data source in this study, was conducted with each participant every Tuesday or Wednesday evening at a time and location convenient to the participants. The interview was intended to help each participant recollect their weekly peer or group interaction behaviors and their perception about peer interaction for the purpose of language learning. Informal observations were also conducted during group activities such as group meals and group outings to provide triangulating data about each participant's behaviors in peer or group interaction. The frequency and length of each observation varied depending on participants' group meeting format. As students in the study abroad program were required to write weekly reflective journals, participants' weekly reflective journals were also collected to glean the information pertaining to their reflections on peer/group

interaction. The researcher also kept a reflective journal to record thoughts stimulated by the observations and other relevant information.

Once the pre-study survey results were collected, all information from the survey was compiled to assist the following data analysis. Data from qualitative data sources (interview transcripts, observations, and documents) were analyzed in two phases: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Yin, 2003). Each participant was considered one case. Two qualitative data analysis methods: constant comparison method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and matrix display (Miles & Huberman, 1995) were employed to organize and decipher data from each case. In the within-case analysis phase, data were preliminarily analyzed each week as they became available. Within-case analysis was conducted generally in five steps. For step 1, the researcher inspected one participant's interview transcripts as well as the researcher's reflective journal entries for a general view of how participants behaved in peer interaction. Step 2 involved grouping relevant raw data under recurring themes in terms of the types of peer interaction and the circumstances under which peer interaction occurred. Constant comparison method was used to avoid redundant themes and mislabeled themes. For step 3, the researcher reviewed each participant's weekly blog entries to glean any information that was pertinent to peer/group interaction to triangulate or complement the earlier analysis. Step 4 involved creating a scheme for each recurring theme. The same set of steps was repeated in the analysis of the data collected from all participants. The scheme in the first within-case analysis was used to guide the data analysis in the other ten cases. The step-4 data analysis yielded a matrix for peer/group interaction behaviors (see Appendix D). The same within-case analysis procedures were followed each week with each new set of data. All data were recorded in the matrices. Finally in step 5, the researcher conducted a diachronic analysis to see how each participant interacted with their peers over time

throughout the program. In the cross-case analysis phase, a synchronic analysis was conducted to compare and contrast each participant's peer/group interaction behaviors and identify the differences and similarities among the participants.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: How did American learners of Mandarin Chinese participate in peer/group interaction when in a study abroad program?

The results revealed very interesting grouping and interaction patterns among the participants throughout the program. Among the participants, Matthew, a half-Caucasian-and-half-Asian student in the 2nd-year class, was the only one who constantly avoided group activities from the first day he arrived to Shanghai and chose to go out individually or with his tutor. Thus, the grouping and peer/group interaction patterns presented in this section apply to the vast majority of the students enrolled in the study abroad program. Based on the diachronic analysis, the 2nd-year participants' (Janie, Jay, Dave, Matthew, and Brett) grouping patterns show three distinct and sequential phases (see Appendix D for a detailed chart) each of which entails different grouping and interaction patterns as detailed in the following texts. The 3rd-year participants' (Amy, Andrew, Annie, Cathy, Emma, and Mike) show two phases throughout the study abroad program.

Both the 2nd-year and 3rd-year participants demonstrated similar grouping and interaction patterns in Phase 1: weeks 1~2 of the study abroad program. In this phase, the entire study abroad group conducted frequent group outings including shopping and eating out after class. Participants reported more frequent group rather than one-to-one interactions, which were characterized as 1) collective conversations with local Chinese; 2) lower-level participants' conscious observations and imitation of higher-level peers' language output; and 3) constant

knowledge sharing of living and language learning tips. In terms of collective conversations, the results revealed two types of group behaviors: 1) everyone in the group contributed a bit such as filling in missing vocabulary or an unsure sentence structure, whenever a conversation took place with a local Chinese; and 2) one confirmed with peers before conversing with native speakers. For example, Mike, a 3rd-year participant, reflected that “*When we interact with people outside of our group and we have to speak in Chinese, we will help each other if one person understands what someone is saying and someone else does...*”¹(interview with Mike on 7/1/2010). The following excerpt illustrates how lower-level learners used higher-level learners as a language resource to check the appropriate tone for “niú (beef)”:

Excerpt 1:

Scenario: At the Noodle Bowl the group frequented. Andrew wanted to order a bowl of beef noodle.

Andrew: 我要... (wǒ yào, I want)

(looking at the Chinese menu, and turning to a peer standing next to him)

Andrew: niú ròu (beef)?

Mike: niú ròu (with a clearly pronounced and deliberately prolonged tone for niu)

Andrew (turning to the cashier): 对，我要牛肉面 (duì, wǒ yào niú ròu miàn. Yes, I want beef noodle).

Lower-level participants also tended to observe and imitate higher-level peers’ language output. For example, Emma who was unconfident in her Chinese reported that “*I was not sure of many things. So most time I just let them speak to the native speakers. It helped me a lot by just*

¹ All quotations are direct interview transcriptions or participants’ blogs. To maintain the authenticity, grammar mistakes were not corrected.

listening to their conversations. I learned many vocabulary and expressions I didn't know before." (interview with Emma on 7/7/2010) Participants also constantly shared living and language learning tips in this phase. Emma reflected, *"Mike told us where to find a clean and affordable massage shop. I told them where to find fresh vegetables. It is nice."* (interview with Emma on 7/7/2010). Janie reflected, *"when we were together, we always talked about how to learn Chinese, like how to memorize characters. I told them the stories I created to help me remember characters."* (interview with Janie on 7/1/2012)

Phase 2 (Weeks 3~5) for the 2nd-year participants was characterized by frequent smaller group activities. In other words, whole group outings faded in this phase. Participants' interaction patterns include 1) a larger amount and frequency of L2 use in group conversations and 2) using each other as learning resource in and out of class. In this phase, the 2nd-year participants seldom went out with their 3rd-year peers or as a whole class. Rather, they split into groups of 2 or 3. In terms of more L2 use, Jay reflected that *"Janie and I always used some simple Chinese when we had lunch together or studied. I feel like we talk to each other more in Chinese and we practice more."* (interview with Jay on 7/14/2011). They also met in small groups to prepare for classes and tests frequently, focusing on the grammatical structures from the textbook. Jay reported that *"As we get further into the chapters, we talk to each other more because the lessons and words are more difficult and we help each other with the grammar a lot"* (interview with Jay on 7/14/2010). Dave, a self-reported slowest learner in the class, in particular benefited from the group help. According to him, *"we've been doing some studying together as a group-with Janie and Jay and Amy has been a big help with the grammar and stuff that I don't understand. I find that I use Amy a lot for some of the things that I cannot communicate with my tutor about. If one of us has a question, we always put it out there and*

have a kind of think-tank together” (interview with Dave on 7/21/2010). The participants also reported more L2 use with each other during smaller group conversations, *“We’ve increased the amount that we’ve been speaking and I’ve been speaking and I’ve been trying to speak Chinese even to people in our group. For example, Andrew and I went to dinner Monday and we tried to speak Chinese most of it until we got... because we started out... Chinese vocabulary is good and we were sitting in talking about our days. We tried to put some of it Chinese and some of it worked and some of it didn’t”* (interview with Dave on 7/21/2010). The participants also turned to each other for help even in class with the presence of their Chinese instructor. During one class observation, the researcher observed that Dave was confused about the phrases “回去 huí qù (go back)” and “回来 huí lái (come back)” presented in Chinese by the professor. He turned to Jay who sat next to him for help. Jay explained the concepts in English. Dave reflected, *“until that moment, I didn’t understand why Chinese use one verb followed with different suffixes to mean two actions”* (interview with Dave on 7/21/2010).

Phase 3 (weeks 6~7) was featured with much less group interaction and more individual activities. In this phase, most 2nd-year participants started to explore the city individually or with their respective tutors. For example, Dave reported that *“I’ve been trying to do a little more studying on my own and I’ve been kind of separating myself a little bit more to be able to use my Chinese... the idea was—it gave me a hour practicing my Chinese and then it gave me about two hours of time where I kind of practiced with people”* (interview with Dave on 7/27/2010). Both Jay and Janie reported that they spent more time with their own tutors during the weekdays. However, despite more outings with native tutors, the 2nd-year participants still sought help from their peers occasionally, usually in the classroom. Brett explained that *“a lot of it was Janie or Jay. They were able to describe that we didn’t understand if Zhou Laoshi said something that we*

didn't understand or he couldn't explain any better...or sometimes he would try to say something and he wouldn't know the English word and he would look to Jay hoping Jay to understand..." (interview with Brett on 8/13/2010). Thus, although participants became more immersed in the target language environment, they continued to rely on their peers, particularly those with higher proficiency, to overcome communication breakdown in the classroom.

In contrast to the 2nd-year participants, the 3rd-year participants entered their Phase 2 (weeks 3~7) soon after they were acquainted with the new environment. Their phase 2 was characterized with more one-on-one activities, either with a classmate or with their respective tutor and more immersion in the local community. Mike reported repeatedly in the interviews that *"Pretty much I just go to school and come back—like my tutor helps me with my interactions but not really anyone in the group"* (interview with Mike on 7/21/2010) and *"I don't really spend much time with them during the week because I am usually in my room studying or doing homework or going out with my tutor. I occasionally talk to Jack (his roommate) if I have questions about our homework"* (interview with Mike on 7/28/2010). Emma said in week 3, *"I think we are all fairly independent more—we are becoming more independent and we don't really need as much"* (interview with Emma on 7/13/2010).

There existed two salient interaction patterns among the 3rd-year participants: 1) more L2 use with the local residents such as their respective tutors and 2) more voluntary language help to lower-level peers when needed. In this phase, participants frequently reported that they usually sought help from their respective tutors and felt more comfortable to speak Chinese outside class. For example, Emma who had the lowest language proficiency in the 3rd-year class reflected that *"I feel very comfortable with my tutor. We went out a lot and she helped me a lot. We always spoke Chinese."* (interview with Emma on 7/21/2010). Most 3rd-year participants were more

willing and confident to offer direct language help to lower-level peers. For example, Amy who was a heritage speaker and had the highest language proficiency in the group frequently reported that *“I’ve been helping a bunch of people because like when Janie and Jay and I hang out or like if we are with a bunch of people studying together as a group, I know I like to correct a lot of people’s pronunciation or like...I am correcting tone or pronunciation—sometimes I correct their sentences every now and then. I know Dave always asks me for like meanings of words.”* (interview with Amy on 7/13/2010).

In sum, the results showed that language proficiency and familiarity with the environment affected the participants’ grouping and interaction patterns. At the beginning of the program, all participants were not familiar with the linguistic and cultural environment. They relied on one other to learn about the new environment and to interact with native speakers. As soon as they became acquainted with the environment, the 3rd-year participants tended to immerse themselves in the local community. The 2nd-year participants split into smaller groups and gradually immersed themselves in the local community by interacting more with their tutors. However, peers continued to be a frequently consulted language resource in and outside the class.

Interestingly, the results also indicated that peer interactions throughout the study abroad program showed patterns of either collaborative or expert/novice interaction rather than of dominant/dominant or dominant/passive interaction according to Storch’s (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002) peer interaction dimensions. In other words, the peer interactions were more conducive to each participant’s language learning. In particular, it was evidenced that lower-level participants offered each other affective, linguistic, and metalinguistic help throughout the program, which resonates with earlier researchers’ observations in regular foreign language classrooms (Cook, 2001; van Lier, 2004).

Research Questions 2: How did American learners of Mandarin Chinese perceive peer/group interaction while studying abroad?

The results also revealed the participants' perception about peer/group interaction during the study abroad program was shaped by their language proficiency and shifted according to their familiarity with the environment and language development. The diachronic analysis yielded two sequential phases that the vast majority of the 2nd-year participants and the 3rd-year ones experienced throughout the study abroad program although the time span of each phase for each language group differed slightly. It is worth noting that Matthew, the half-Asian-and-half-Caucasian student in the 2nd-year class, again demonstrated a different perspective from the rest of the group since the beginning of the program. He maintained the perspective that *"we are just equally clueless and in the same boat so I think it's kind of most like anything culturally you are just kind of finding out independently"* (interview with Matthew on 7/7/2010) and *"The best interaction that should be focused on is to try to interact with the people as much as you can. I mean that's the most important thing because that is where you are going to hear true Chinese"* (interview with Matthew on 7/14/2010).

In phase 1 (weeks 1~3), all five participants except for Matthew as mentioned earlier expressed predominantly positive comments on the significance of peer/group interaction in their language learning and daily life during the study abroad program. For example, Dave described his peers as *"comfort blanket"* or *"safety net"* when communicating with local residents (interview with Dave on 7/6/2010) because *"it is less embarrassing to ask them for help—also if none of us get it, it is kind of comforting that we are not the only one that is struggling with it"* (interview with Janie on 7/7/2010). Brett elaborated on the importance of interacting in L1 with his peers after class, *"If we were to study for six hours and then come back and be with a host*

family and have to speak it even- I think it would be way more frustrating. Especially for only being a 2nd-year and it would really put a lot of pressure on people because I know some people are already struggling with missing family and friends and stuff and stressing out about the test every Friday. So if you were to come back and not be able to release and hang out and talk in English, then it would be way too stressful and these seven weeks of studying way too intensive” (interview with Brett on 7/1/2010).

After three weeks of experience in China, all 2nd-year participants entered Phase 2 (weeks 4~7) in which they weighed L1 or L2 peer/group interaction less significantly and started to value direct interactions in Chinese with their teachers, tutors and local residents. The data showed two salient views about peer/group interaction: 1) peers provided better grammatical explanation, thus complemented the teacher’s grammar instruction; 2) peers should speak more L2. In terms of peers’ helpfulness in grammar learning, Dave explained that *“grammar-wise I am very weak and so it is nice to be able to talk to people and have them help out with what I am missing and I find it much easier learning grammar from people who speak English because I can learn formula of it. When I learn it from a person who is Chinese or I read it in a book, sometimes it is not written in a way that I understand”* (interview with Dave on 7/14/2010). Even Janie, the top student in the 2nd-year class, agreed with this view, *“Because my classmates are also English speakers, they understand if I get hung up on something or ... they were much more likely to understand why I didn’t get something and to help out for myself”* (interview with Janie on 8/13/2010). The 2nd-year participants also noticed the pitfalls of spending too much time with peers and speaking L1. Jay reflected that *“I feel like at this point we could use a little more Chinese practice with each other during class and outside of class because we still primarily speak English to each other”* (interview with Jay on 7/14/2010) and in week 5, he realized that

“it is slightly better to talk with the tutor because it forces me to use more Chinese—because when I talk with them I can occasionally slip in English and then with the tutor—they can correct me with a lot of things and when we are going outside somewhere with the tutor, I try to tell them my thoughts in Chinese...” (interview with Jay on 7/27/2010).

In phase 1 (weeks 1~2), all 3rd-year participants also felt predominantly positive about their peer/group interaction particularly in L1 because of two reasons: 1) peers helped with language when communicating with local residents as shown in the previous section; and 2) L1 interactions with peers relaxed mind as Mike reflected that *“I’d say it is a good thing to have a group here because if it was just me and every day I was to take Chinese and only talk in Chinese, I would want to kill myself. I would go crazy because I wouldn’t have anyone to just relax and talk to”* (interview with Mike on 7/1/2010).

Compared to the 2nd-year participants, all 3rd-year participants entered their phase 2 (weeks 3~7) sooner. In phase 2, they expressed three salient views about peer/group interactions: 1) peers were too distractive and unhelpful with language learning; 2) peer interaction was necessary when a break was needed on weekends; and 3) helping lower-level peers was fun and helpful for own language development. There existed a consensus among all 6 3rd-year participants that peer/group interaction was not helpful for, sometimes even hindered language learning at this phase. For example, Emma who was the lowest-level learner in the class reflected that *“I actually enjoy going out by myself a little bit more than with the group because it forces me to speak more than when I’m with everyone else in the group”* (interview with Emma on 7/13/2010). Mike felt he gained more help from native speakers as he became more confident in his language proficiency. He commented that *“most help... I’d say just from the teachers—mostly the teachers because practice—that is pretty much all you need... my language has gotten*

better so I don't need any more help from my peers/group members" (interview with Mike on 7/28/2010). However, the majority of 3rd-year participants (Mike, Amy, Andrew, and Cathy) also didn't object the idea of hanging out with their peers on weekends occasionally because *"it relaxed me when we went to bars on weekends. Speaking Chinese all the time would make me feel like brain fried."* (interview with Mike on 8/13/2010). On the other hand, Amy who constantly helped the 2nd-year peers felt offering language help was interesting and useful for her own language learning. For example, she reflected that *"I've found that it is fun speaking with them in Chinese"* (interview with Amy on 7/27/2010). She also admitted that *"helping them helped me a lot because I've always heard the saying 'You know one thing, but teaching it is another'. I always found that because they started questioning me, I found myself questioning the things that I learned not so much as if it was right but more why it was right or like why it was this way and I found that it was kind of neat. I mean like it made me strive to learn more about the language and excel more in the language so that I could help them in turn... and yeah it did help review a lot because I knew there were some questions that I should have been able to answer and then sometimes I would be like, 'wait a minute... is this correct?'"* (interview with Amy on 8/14/2010).

There was one perception that was frequently mentioned by all of the participants although they didn't relate it to their language learning: their view of the study abroad group. Since the day they arrived to Shanghai, all of the participants had realized that they formed a unique support group that was different from Chinese people living around them and would not have existed if they stayed in their home university in the U.S. In week 1, Amy in the 3rd-year class reflected that *"When we combine as a group together, it is kind of like a nice taste of*

America again” (interview with Amy on 7/1/2010) while Jay in the 2nd-year class said that *“I like how we are all one big community”* (interview with Jay on 7/1/2010).

The sense of a unique group emerged and was recognized among the majority of the participants regardless of their language proficiency and heritage throughout the program. For example, in week 7, Andrew, a 3rd-year participant with a Semitic background, reflected that *“Because we were in China, we were our own little community and in our own little niche. At DePaul, all we did was go to class and then after we all left and did our own things and I didn’t really know any of them. And now we are all really good friends and we feel really close to each other so it’s just like helping a buddy out now. Because we only have ourselves to rely on”* (interview with Andrew on 8/13/2010). Jay, a Chinese American from the 2nd-year class, shared his sentiment in his final reflective journal, *“As I sat down one final night in Beijing, I flipped through thousands of photos that I have taken during the past 8 weeks with my study abroad peers. Life for each and every one of us has been changed and I am very glad that we have all been able to experience an entirely different culture together. I will miss waking up to seeing our group every morning for breakfast, walking to class together and exploring different parts of the city every weekend. Being with the group, I saw many different perspectives and opinions of things that I would have normally looked over...I look forward to continuing being friends with everyone that I have met in the program...”* (Jay’s reflective journal #7). Dave, a 2nd-year participant with a Caucasian background, also wrote that *“the thing I am going to miss most are the people who have cared the most for me and spent the most time with me over this trip: my new family. I say miss with a caveat because I sincerely hope that our group stays in touch over the coming years. We might not have felt like the most close-knit group when we first came together. But friendships have developed immensely since the start of the program and I find*

myself close to people that I might have otherwise never talked to. At first I thought it would be no big deal leaving the hotel and not seeing everybody as often. But the farther and farther I get from A8 lǚ guǎn, the more I realize how much my family meant to me.” (Dave’s reflective journal #7). This group identity appeared even more meaningful to Cathy and Jay, two American-born Chinese, as they did not feel they were fully accepted by the local Chinese community due to their Chinese look with relatively low Chinese proficiency. Cathy, a Chinese American in the 3rd-year class, reflected that *“Whenever I try to communicate with the people here and when they do not understand me because of either my tones or simply because I do not know how to answer them they would give me a weird look as if they are questioning why can I not communicate with them when I clearly look like I should be able to.”*(Cathy’s reflective journal #1). Feeling more belonging to this group, Cathy was even concerned at one point that they were losing one symbol of their group identity, their English, due to the fact that the group spoke too much Chinese. She wrote that *“maybe a couple of days ago in class—someone was trying to say something in English or spell something and kind of spelled it wrong. It seems we are losing our English skills. It seems like it.”* (interview with Cathy on 7/13/2010).

However, this new group identity was not necessarily shared by all participants in this study abroad program. For example, Matthew, a half-Asian-and-half-Caucasian 2nd-year participant, in week 1 expressed his plan in the program *“I mean, we come to China, we want to learn the language and culture. I want to be able to blend it. The only way I can do it is to talk to more Chinese people and learn how to behave like a native speaker. I usually just go to talk to those street vendors and ask about their life.”* (interview with Matthew on 7/1/2010). This belief in the importance of immersion in language learning may explain why Matthew consciously and constantly distanced himself from other group members during the program. On the other hand,

Emma, a half-Asian-and-half-Caucasian 3rd-year participant, seemed to have grown out of this new group because of her greater familiarity with the environment, her increased confidence in her Chinese, and her tutor's acceptance of her as a friend. The researcher observed that at the beginning of the program, she relied heavily on her group members when going out and tried to observe and learn from her peers when they interacted with native speakers. In the middle of the program, she spent more time with her tutor. She noted that *"Now I am comfortable with her. Today she called me xiao meimei (little sister). I feel pretty comfortable when I am alone by myself, away from my group members. Everybody is so busy now."* (interview with Emma on 7/13/2010) and *"my tutor is definitely my close Chinese friend and because of the nature of the program, we have learned a lot about each other... Occasionally she will bring me ice cream and slowly I have started to notice her soft side. When we went as a group to qipu lu, I felt she took the role of a sisterly figure. Everywhere we went, she tried to hold my hand or put her arm around my shoulders to make sure I wouldn't get lost in the sea of people"* (Emma's reflective journal #4). It thus appears that recognition of the new group identity also depended on the learners' personal goals in the study abroad program (also known as agency) as well as on the social acceptance in the host culture.

The findings presented above show a clear picture that participants' dependence on peer/group interaction when studying abroad evolved with their language development and increasing familiarity with the study abroad environment. So did their perception regarding the importance of peer/group interaction in language learning and daily life. In general, the more confident they felt about their language proficiency, the less help they sought via peer/group interaction, and the less they valued the helpfulness of peer/group interaction in their language learning and daily life. More importantly, although the dependence receded gradually, it is

undeniable that the lower-level participants felt peers at the same and higher level provided important affective, linguistic, and metalinguistic support throughout the program. In addition, although the higher-level participants soon moved out of the comfort zone enabled through L1 and L2 peer/group interaction, they still felt peer/group interaction was indispensable because it either provided a relaxing break from intensive L2 study or helped refresh their language memory. This resonates with previous research findings (e.g. Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2004; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Moreover, the peer/group interaction patterns reported in the study also indicate that more collaborative and expert/novice interaction occurred during peer/group interaction, which is believed to be conducive to language learning (Storch, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002).

On the other hand, the findings also illustrate the complexity in a study abroad context due to the intertwining influence from various social cultural factors such as identity, agency, and L2 socialization. It is unrealistic to expect all learners to forget about their American identity when they arrive to the host country. It seems two situations: (1) their lack of confidence in their Chinese language and in understanding of the culture and (2) local residents' hesitance to socialize them due to their different physical features and lack of language proficiency (Kinging, 2008), postulated that it was not easy for them to fully immerse in the local community immediately. This understanding in turn led to the students' subconscious urge to form their own community within the group until they felt confident enough to reach out to their tutors and the local residents. The tutors' willingness to socialize the learners, in the case of Emma, seemed to play a significant role in the process of socialization as well. Interestingly, despite their higher language proficiency and greater comfort when communicating with their tutors and other local residents toward the end of the program, many participants still preferred

peer help with certain aspects of language learning and planned to maintain the connection with the group even after the study abroad program. Although it may be far-reaching to claim an emergence of a new bilingual and bicultural identity (Kramch, 2004; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), the unique study abroad experience these participants shared motivated them to develop a special bond with each another, which distinguished them from their American peers who have not studied abroad in China. This special group identity might be a transitional phase when the participants shifted from a monocultural identity to a fully fledged bicultural identity. Certainly, there also existed learners like Matthew who firmly believed immersion in the local communities was the only way to learn a L2. He deliberately took his agency (van Lier, 2004) to blend in the target culture from day one and take great efforts to avoid unnecessary interaction with his American peers after class.

In sum, the findings of the study show that peer/group interaction in both L1 and L2 did play a viable role in language learning and daily life in the study abroad program, particularly for lower-level learners at the beginning of the program. Learners' language proficiency, identity, the local residents' willingness to socialize learners as well as learners' agency intertwiningly affected how they interacted with their peers and in turn how they perceived the helpfulness of peer/group interaction during the program. Language learning and socialization take time. Educators should not ignore some learners' desire to build a special group bond with their study abroad peers before they are linguistically and socially ready to be fully immersed in the target culture.

Conclusion

The "swim or sink" strategy has been long hailed in study abroad programs. Educators and students widely believe learners should be fully immersed in the target language

environment since the moment they land in the host country. In this way, they would not waste the resources and opportunities assumedly accessible to them. Although the controversial findings from a myriad of study abroad studies (e.g. Kinginger, 2008) have alerted us to the complexity of a study abroad context, very few empirical studies have been conducted to investigate the interaction among learners themselves. This chapter reports on an empirical study that investigated through both diachronic and synchronic lenses of analyses of eleven study abroad students' grouping and peer/group interaction patterns as well as their perceptions of peer/group interaction during a study abroad program. Participants' shifting peer/group interaction patterns and evolving perceptions about the importance of peer/group interaction evidenced that L2 learning in a study abroad context is a very complex process shaped by a myriad of intertwining factors. It is simple-minded to either blindly deny the helpfulness of peer/group interaction or hastily hail its benefits in such a context.

The study results show that peer/group interaction in both L1 and L2 enabled affective, linguistic, and metalinguistic support to the vast majority of the learners, particularly those at a lower level, at the beginning of the study abroad program. Although there are learners who are more willing to be fully immersed in the target culture since the beginning of the program, it is also important to not ignore some learners' desire to build a group identity with other study abroad peers, which might be an instrumental transitional phase before they form a fully fledged bilingual and bicultural identity as expected by foreign language educators. Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of American students studying abroad in China. For those who are enrolled in school-run intensive programs and live with their American peers, it is inevitable to interact with their peers. Whether and how much they should speak Chinese during the program is an urgent pedagogical issue facing all the administrators and educators. This study is

one of the pioneering studies that adopted a sociocultural and developmental approach to investigate American learners' peer/group interaction during a study abroad program. It is hoped it contributes to both the field of SLAC research and pedagogy and the general field of study abroad research by providing a better understanding of how American learners behave and perceive peer/group interaction in a study abroad program in mainland China.

However, several limitations of the study must be recognized. First, the data of this study were only collected from 11 participants and the program model under investigation was only 8 weeks long. Thus, the findings of this study may not be generalized to other program models which last longer and have more student participants, which could change the group interaction dynamics. Second, the primary data sources of the study were interview transcripts and self-reflection blogs due to the logistic restrictions in a study abroad environment. It might have triggered incomplete or inaccurate account of information.

Research on SLAC in a study abroad context is still an uncharted area. As a rapidly emerging study abroad site, China, compared to other western countries, has a long history of being a monocultural society. Many Chinese citizens are still not used to seeing and living with people who have drastically different physical features from native Chinese. How study abroad students and native Chinese people handle their interaction is an interesting area. And more studies are needed to investigate whether peer/group interaction among American learners and what type of peer/group interaction may lead to what language gains when they study abroad in China in programs of various models. In addition, the unique socialization issues in a study abroad context encountered by heritage and mixed-racial learners merit future research as well.

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Appendix A: Demographic Information of the Participants

	Language Proficiency	Gender	Ethnicity	Prior Experience in China
Janie	2 nd -year	F	Caucasian	Toured in Taiwan for two weeks years ago
Jay	2 nd -year	M	Asian	Heritage learner, Cantonese speaker, has family in HK, never been to mainland China.
Dave	2 nd -year	M	Caucasian	Never been to mainland China
Matthew	2 nd -year	M	Asian/Caucasian	Minimum exposure to Chinese language and culture at home, never been to mainland China
Brett	2 nd -year	M	Caucasian	Never been to mainland China
Mike	3 rd -year	M	Caucasian	Never been to mainland China
Emma	3 rd -year	F	Asian/Caucasian	Minimum exposure to Chinese language and culture at home, Never been to mainland China
Annie	3 rd -year	F	Caucasian	Visited China on a two-week tour in high school. Minimum contact with native speakers of Chinese on the tour.
Andrew	3 rd -year	M	Caucasian	Never been to mainland China
Cathy	3 rd -year	F	Asian	Heritage learner, Cantonese speaker, has been to HK and Guangzhou for occasional family visits
Amy	3 rd -year	F	Asian	Heritage learner, Mandarin speaker, has been to Beijing for family visits in summers.

Appendix B: Pre-Study Survey

Pre-program Survey

Dear students, thank you for participating in this study. The information you provide here will help the researcher understand your educational background and your expectation for enrolling in the study abroad program.

1. Your major(s): _____
Your minor(s): _____
2. Are you a heritage speaker of Chinese?
☐ Yes. If so, which dialect do you speak at home?
☐ Mandarin ☐ Cantonese ☐ Other dialect
☐ No. If no, what is your race? _____
3. In which year are you (in this upcoming Autumn quarter) at DePaul University?
☐ Freshman ☐ Sophomore
☐ Junior ☐ Senior
☐ Other, please explain: _____
4. For how many months have you been learning Mandarin?
☐ more than 36 months ☐ 24~36 months
☐ 12 ~24 months ☐ less than 12 months
5. Have you been to mainland China before?
☐ Yes
 If yes, for how long? _____
 If yes, for what purpose? _____
☐ No
6. What do you expect to learn during the study abroad program?

Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

1. Did you go out with one or more of your group members? When?
2. Can you describe what you and your peers did and said when you were together?
3. Did you use Chinese or English when you talked to your peers?
4. Do you think your interaction with your peers in the past one week helps your Chinese learning? If yes, in what ways? If no, why do you think so?

Appendix D: Peer/Group Interaction Patterns

Peer/Group Interaction Behaviors

2 nd -year Learners	3 rd -year Learners/Confident Learner
Phase 1: Week 1~2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly group outings (shopping & meals) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Group efforts when conversing with native speakers of Chinese: fill in vocabulary & sentence structures. ◦ Confirming with peers “how to say this?” before conversing with native speakers ◦ Lower-level students observing higher-level peers; • Sharing language learning and living tips (grammar learning, memorizing characters, restaurants, massage sites) 	
Phase 2: Week 3~5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smaller group outings with occasional L1 use <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Exchange cultural observations • Study together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Prepare for tests ◦ Study for grammar, vocabulary ◦ Speaking Chinese with each other • 	Phase 2: Week 3~7 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more L2 use with the local residents such as their respective tutors; • more voluntary language help to lower-level peers when needed Help lower-level students with homework, give language examples.
Phase 3: Week 6~7 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual or w/tutor outings • More L2 use with peers • Help grammar in class or when needed 	

Appendix E: Perceptions about Peer/Group Interaction

2 nd -year Learners	3 rd -year Learners/Confident Learner
Phase 1: Week 1~3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Family”, “comfort blanket” , “more affective support” • “Less embarrassed by oneself” in group interaction with native speakers of Chinese 	Phase 1: Week 1~2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peers helpful when communicating with native speakers • “relaxation” with peers
Phase 2: Week 4~7 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native speakers & peers complement each other <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teachers more knowledgeable & native speakers for speaking; ○ Peers explain grammar better and understand the mistakes • Convenient & supportive 	Phase 2: Week 3~7 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peers are distractive, prefer self-exploration of the environment or with tutors; • Peers for hanging out on weekends or night time when in need of a break;