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Language Learning Strategies and Intercultural Competence in the Year Abroad Study in China

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Introduction

With increasing globalization and internationalization, institutions of higher education around the world are becoming obliged to address the following question: How can we best prepare our students to become global citizens and professionals in today's diverse world (Jackson, 2010)? To respond to the need for internationalization, many universities around the world provide year abroad (YA) courses for their students to work or study in a host country. In the UK, most degree-level Modern Language programs incorporate a period of YA which ranges from six months to a full year with the aims of enabling the students to develop advanced language skills, increase their intercultural competence and build up generic skills such as personal maturity and self-reliance. From my own teaching experience, after completing the 'rite of passage' from their YA study, students often have increased confidence in their language proficiency and their intercultural competence at various levels. In a YA meeting for

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returnee students to share their life and study experiences in China, one student confidently commented 'you learn more in two months in China than you have learned in two years in the UK'. After that speaker had discussed how the YA program had allowed him to increase his language proficiency dramatically, he then shared his more 'exotic' experiences with squat toilets and dormitory life in China with his course mates. His intercultural experiences generated much disbelief and amusement among his fellow students. What this student said echoed the findings of some studies which have identified the benefits of study abroad (DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Yu, 2010) and how a YA program plays an important role in helping students to learn a new language and in activating dormant knowledge which was learned previously (Pellegrino, 1998) and increasing students' cultural understanding (Jin, 2014; Jackson, 2015). Even so, it is wise not to assume that YA program can perform wonders and boost every student's language proficiency (Meier & Daniels, 2013; Wilkinson, 1998) and increase their intercultural competence (Jackson, 2015). After teaching returnee students from China for years in the UK higher education system, I have been intrigued to see that some students did make much more progress in terms of language gains and intercultural competence in comparison with others. The particular interest of this current study is to see what language learning strategies are used by students in their YA study in China to increase their language proficiency and what intercultural experiences they have in relation to their intercultural competence.

Language Learning Strategies

Learning strategies were defined by Oxford (1990) as 'specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations' (p. 8). Griffiths (2008) also offered a viable definition of language learning strategies as 'activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning' (p. 87). As language learning strategies rely on learners consciously choosing the activities, it requires that the learners monitor their own learning and develop executive skills (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Oxford (2013) examined learning strategies in three dimensions: cognitive strategies, affective strategies and socio-cultural interactive strategies. Cognitive strategies help learners to manage their cognitive dimension, which include using the senses to understand and remember, activating knowledge, compensation strategies and metacognitive strategies. Affective strategies help learners to create positive emotions and stay motivated, which include strategies such as activating supportive emotions, beliefs and attitudes and generating and maintaining motivation. Socio-cultural interactive strategies help learners to deal with issues of context, communication and culture in L2 learning, and include interacting to learn and communicate, overcoming knowledge gaps in communicating and dealing with the socio-cultural context and identities (p. 88). It was also pointed out that affective dimensions and socio-cultural/interactive dimensions are two areas that have received inadequate attention from strategy researchers (Oxford, 2013).

A number of studies have shown that higher-level students have reported using more learning strategies than lower-level students (Griffiths, 2008), but it is also necessary to be aware that some studies have discovered that poor language learners might use many strategies unsuccessfully (Vann & Abraham, 1990). In cognitive strategies, some researchers have shown that students who show self-regulation by monitoring their progress, persevering at tasks and setting realistic goals are more successful (Wang, Spencer, & Xing, 2009). Some researchers have investigated affective strategies and discovered that integrative motivation plays a very positive role in socio-cultural adaptation and academic adaptation whereas language anxiety plays a very negative role (Yu, 2010). For socio-cultural strategies, findings have suggested that learners who tried to integrate themselves into a new social network progressed more in their language learning abroad (Isabelli, 2006). In the UK, Meier and Daniels (2013) explored a group of British students' social interactions during their YA study in the Europe and discovered that some students found it difficult to make meaningful contact with local people, which prompted the researchers to suggest that the YA should emphasize participation in and contribution to the local community as a key objective.

The Development of Intercultural Competence in the YA Context

In considering intercultural communication, Holliday (2011) reminds us to move away from the essentialist view which considers people's individual behavior as entirely defined by the national culture and to move toward a non-essentialist view of culture which acknowledges a fluid complexity with blurred boundaries (p. 14). An example of an essentialist view of China can be found on the Hofstede center website (http://geert-hofstede.com/china.html), and in one click, readers are presented with a picture of what Chinese society is like. It is a society which scores low on individualism and high on long-term orientation. This view provides a broad picture for an outsider to get a brief glimpse of Chinese society, but it should not be used to label all Chinese into these categories and to make the stereotype become the essence of who they are (Holliday, 2011, p. 4).

A number of YA studies have indicated that YA is an efficient way of increasing students' intercultural competence, but the process of 'being intercultural' does not come from merely having contact with the target culture. Alred, Byram and Fleming (2003) stated that whilst intercultural experiences create a potential for questioning the taken-for-granted in one's own self and environment, 'being intercultural' requires a person to be aware of experiencing otherness and to develop the ability to analyze the experience and act upon the insights into self and other which the analysis brings (p. 4). Bredella (2003) commented that being intercultural means 'acknowledging that we belong to a culture and exploring how we are shaped by our culture just as others are shaped by theirs' (p. 226). Within this framework, by just having experience of the target culture but lacking the willingness to overcome ethnocentrism and the capacity to reflect on how culture is shaped, one could exaggerate the cultural stereotype rather than increase intercultural competence.

Some researchers have pointed out that YA study could have different impacts on students' intercultural competence. For example, Jackson (2015) used IDC (the Intercultural Development Continuum) questionnaires and interviews to investigate students' intercultural experiences when they moved abroad from Hong Kong. The result showed that the semester abroad had a positive impact on students' intercultural competence, but it

also showed some variations: those who attained a higher level of IDC became more willing to interact with individuals from a different linguistic and cultural background and more interested in global affairs generally. Some returnees, however, did not show any plans for further international involvement, nor any interest in having more intercultural contact. Some of the participants had experienced intercultural misunderstandings and sometimes found it difficult to adjust to an unfamiliar way of life in a new culture, especially in the first few weeks. Intercultural experiences are not always comfortable for some students who then come to the conclusion that 'there is no place like home'.

In YA study, the classroom is another social context in which YA students are likely to encounter cultural challenges. No matter where classrooms are situated in the world, there is usually a contrast between teachers and learners in comparison with the home culture. Once learners migrate to a new culture and move from one educational setting into another, they not only encounter different classroom settings but also the underlying rules, values and beliefs by which they operate. As most YA curriculums are arranged in an intensive teaching schedule, whether students can adapt to the target classroom culture is closely linked with their academic performance. Burnett and Gardner (2006) investigated a group of Chinese students at Queen's University, Belfast, and found that some of the students saw their British lecturers as unhelpful as they only gave source materials to the students and expected them to undertake independent study, which was very different from the teaching styles that they had experienced in China. When a second interview was conducted a year later, some of the students had started to recognize the value of independent study. This study highlighted the importance of guiding international students to consider different cultural values and beliefs in the classroom setting as they play a crucial role in shaping how learning takes place.

The Study

In order to further understand how YA students improve their language proficiency and increase their intercultural competence, the purpose of this study is to explore the two following questions:

Research Questions

1. What are the language learning strategies used by the participants in their YA study in China?
2. How do the participants' intercultural experiences relate to their intercultural competence?

The first question will identify the strategies used by the participants in China. The author is aware that there is a distinction between conscious and unconscious learning strategies (Dörnyei, 2001). The focus of this study is on strategies reported by the participants, so I shall focus here only on conscious learning strategies. The second question will examine the intercultural experiences reported by the participants in order to understand how their experience impacts on their intercultural competence.

Participants

The subjects of this study were 48 third-year students from an East Midland university in the UK who had participated in the YA program in China between 2012 and 2015. All of the participants were undertaking joint honors courses of which one of the subjects was Chinese. The majority of the participants in this study had spent a year in China, but some had only gone for six months. The age of the majority of the students ranged from 19 to 23 with a few mature students aged from 25 to 35. In this study, the term 'competent learners' refers to students whose overall marks were 2.1 or above in the UK marking matrix and 'less competent learners' are those whose marks were 2.2 or below in the final year.

Three partner universities located in Beijing, Shanghai and Yunnan were available for students to choose. The partner universities provided Mandarin Chinese courses for an average of 20 hours a week, 4 hours in the morning from Monday to Friday for these exchange students. The majority of the students were at high elementary and intermediate levels although a few had reached advanced level.

Data

The main data of this study were 48 copies of dossiers compiled by the students. These dossiers are one of the two elements required by the participants' home university in order for them to achieve the YA certificate. The format of a dossier includes (1) setting learning targets and goals in the areas of language acquisition, cultural competence, knowledge and understanding and work-related skills, (2) identifying strategies, (3) evaluating progress and (4) a final appraisal. When analyzing the dossiers, the researcher first read through the contents and highlighted significant issues related to the research questions, which she then broke down into two main categories: language strategies and intercultural communication. In each main category, small units which constituted the same elements of themes were classified together, translated into English and analyzed.

Findings and Discussions

Language Learning Strategies

When the participants first arrived in China, the majority of them had perceived how to improve their speaking and listening abilities to be their primary learning targets and had set up different strategies to improve both of these skills (Table 9.1).

With regard to improving their listening, cognitive strategies such as using the senses to understand and remember the language were commonly used by the participants. The majority of them reported using the Chinese media (television, movies, radio and music) to practice their listening. Chinese media such as Yuku which provide subtitles were especially welcomed by the learners who used the subtitles as a compensation strategy to increase their listening comprehension. Strategies for speaking practice involved more social interaction with speakers of Chinese in a real situation. The interlocutors could be native speakers of Chinese (language exchange partners, Chinese friends, teachers, cleaning ladies and coaches in the gym were commonly reported) and their classmates from all over the world. Interestingly, a number of the participants reported

Table 9.1 Strategies used to improve listening and speaking ability

Watching Chinese TV/Chinese movies/animation with Chinese subtitles
Watching Chinese films with English subtitles/English films with Chinese subtitles
Listening to the radio in Chinese /Chinese music
Making friends with the classmates (international students) and attending social events such as going to a restaurant, café, cinema or pub or traveling
Chatting with local people: shop owners/cleaning ladies/personal trainers in the gym and so on
Making friends with native speakers of Chinese through the language exchange program
Finding a part-time job or becoming a volunteer

how they had benefited from making friends with international students who had a good command of Chinese but limited English proficiency. In a corpora study, Crossley and McNamara (2010) discovered that inter-language talk, a conversation between two non-native speakers (NNSs) received similar lexical input to a conversation between NSs (native speakers) and that interlanguage talk consisted of a greater variety of more common words. Advanced NNSs are likely to use the foreigner's talk which involves 'simplifications within the grammatical rule structure of the language' (Ellis, 1985, p. 133) and thus increase the participants' communication competence. As the participants were only involved in the intensive Mandarin language program, the international students had become their first group of friends and an important source for their second-language acquisition.

The student data also showed that competent language learners made more use of socio-cultural/interactive strategies to improve their speaking, and saw communicating as a way of learning. They tended to have several native speakers as conversation partners (four or five native speakers for some) to help them to learn Chinese, or they made friends with international students with a good command of Chinese. As Participant 10 succinctly put it: 'I don't have any strategy, I just leave my room'. To leave one's room for a new world can be a daunting experience, but it does a good job in improving speaking ability. Participant 24 echoed this idea by saying 'Learning a language needs discipline, you need to make yourself leave your comfort zone'. She further assessed how socio-cultural/interactive strategies suited her learning style better than cognitive learning strategies:

> When I first arrived in China, I tried to use a vocabulary list and did more reading, but this strategy was not useful to me, because I had a lot of homework to do. I know I am a shy person, so I decided to apply a different strategy. After the lesson, I talked to people in the campus and outside campus. I went to Qinghua and Beijing University to listen to lectures … I am surrounded by Chinese people. (Participant 24)

Participant 24 raised in this comment an important issue on using a different learning style. After realizing that cognitive learning strategies such as using memory and practicing from the vocabulary list did not give her a satisfactory result, she decided to adopt more social strategies, such as talking to people and attending talks. Because her other joint major was in International Relations, she reported attending the lectures related to her major not only to increase her language proficiency but also her professional development. When learning a foreign language in the learner's home country, cognitive strategies which involve memorizing materials in order to repeat them is prevalent; however, this study has shown that learning a language in the target culture provides more opportunities for learners to adopt more social strategies by communicating with local people and making use of other available resources from the target culture to motivate their learning. The strategies proved to be successful as Participant 24 was one of the few who were able to upgrade her overall mark from a low 2.2 in Year 2 to a high 2.1 in her final year.

Another common social strategy used by the students was to have a part-time job, mainly teaching English. This strategy helped the participants to understand the society and provided a venue for practicing Chinese (Participant 9). Around one third of the participants who had had experiences of either working (mainly as an English tutor at school or in a family) or volunteer work reported that the job environment helped them to greatly improve their Chinese proficiency. The result also echoes the finding of a previous study that participation in and contribution to the local community greatly helped the YA students with social interaction (Meier & Daniels, 2013). The data showed that some participants made use of the opportunity to participate in the local community for various reasons, although not all of the part-time jobs led to language gains. A few participants did not gain much in their language proficiency as they had mainly worked in an environment where English was a medium of communication (Table 9.2).

Table 9.2 Strategies used to improve reading and writing

Making a vocabulary list to practice vocabulary and revising grammar
Reading the environment, such as road signs, advertisements and brochures
Reading articles on Chinese websites and in newspapers and magazines
Using Chinese social media and exchanging text messages with friends

With regard to the reading and writing strategies, some cognitive strategies such as making a vocabulary list and reading articles on websites and in magazines were reported. Competent learners reported using more cognitive strategies for improving their reading ability and were pleased with the progress that they had made. Participant 11 is a good example:

I don't think my reading and writing were good last semester. Then I bought a lot of books and read every night. I think my reading has improved a lot, so has my writing because I have made a vocabulary list and I practice new words and grammar every day. Now I can recognize a lot of Chinese characters. Learning new words and new grammar are similar. I think I am ten times better than when I first came here. (Participant 11)

After class, Participant 11 applied cognitive strategies such as memorizing the vocabulary and grammar points in order to revise and reinforce what he had learned from the class and from his own reading materials. He considered this method to be effective for him because he had made dramatic progress. Some learners described how they had found hands-on reading materials from the environment:

When I am outside, I can read the characters on the ads and know the message … Sometimes I buy Chinese fashion magazines because it is easier than reading newspapers and I also can learn some new words. When I am cooking or cleaning my room, I watch TV with subtitles so I can practice listening and reading characters. (Participant 17)

Immersing herself in the target language, Participant 17 had made use of the reading materials available and accessible to her, such as advertisements, fashion magazines and subtitles on the television. Other participants mentioned that road signs and brochures are also practical reading materials. With the increased use of technology, some participants reported

that Chinese social media became a very effective learning tool for them to practice their reading and writing skills. The students used social media to send texts (writing) and to receive texts (reading). The use of technology also provided more opportunities for networking.

> My Chinese friend introduced QQ, Kugou (酷狗), Renren (人人网), Wechat (微信) and Weblog (微博) to me and even helped me to upload all the apps on the computer and mobile phone. It is very convenient and easy to use these Chinese social media. It is also a good way to learn a language. I use it every day and find it very interesting. (Participant 22)

> I use QQ and Renren to communicate with my Chinese friends. Surfing the web helps me a lot, for example, if I have any questions, I can ask my friends immediately, I have a good connection on the web. (Participant 5)

Popular Chinese applications such as Wechat and QQ played a very important role in the participants' language learning and social life. These free apps offer both instant voice and text messaging and are very popular social networking tools in China, and by using them the participants could build networks, share conversations and meet new people online. Learning writing by sending text messages is also another interesting issue. Sending text messages only requires the users to key in pinyin (the Latin alphabet) and choose the appropriate Chinese characters from the list, which lifts the burden of character writing and dramatically speeds up the communication. From the aspect of language learning, the social media increase the speed of communication and help to build up a dynamic social network.

Attending Lessons as an Effective Strategy

It was interesting to find that none of the participants explicitly mentioned attending lessons as part of their learning strategy. The reason for this might be that the participants considered that their teachers were in charge of the formal instruction and that they themselves were responsible

for their after-class study, which, to some extent, reveals a teacher-centered teaching approach in the class. The data from the dossiers revealed that competent learners had more discussions on the value of the lessons and saw them as a platform for improving their language proficiency and intercultural competence, in comparison with the less competent learners. Advanced learners such as Participant 35 made use of the language learning strategies suggested by the teachers and found learning Chinese in China a productive process.

> The teacher taught us that the best strategy to learn Chinese is to make use of 'four more': speak more, listen more, read more and visit more (多说,多听,多看,多玩儿.) I think she is right. When I study Chinese on my own, I watch TV, read textbooks, practise writing and learn new characters, which are all useful methods. When you revise what you have learned on that day, you understand the lesson better. If you come across a new word, just write it for a few times and then you know it. For me, watching Chinese TV was a good learning method: I could learn Chinese and enjoy the programme at the same time. (Participant 35)

Participant 35 reported she had benefited a great deal from the 'four more' learning strategies suggested by her teacher. After the lessons, she implemented cognitive strategies (revising the lessons, practicing new words, watching television) and used social strategies (organizing class events with other international students and traveling with them) to improve her language. Her statement highlights both how formal instruction can serve to structure students' language learning and the role of teachers as mediators to help students to adapt to a new learning culture. Participant 46 also echoed the value of formal instruction in the area of cultural understanding:

> I feel that I am increasing my cultural knowledge every day. I live in a community where I have plenty of opportunities to meet with the locals …. When I attend lessons, our teachers are a very useful cultural tool. They are teaching us new words and grammar and cultural points at the same time. (Participant 46)

Participant 46 highlighted the role of the teacher as a cultural mediator with whom she could discuss cultural issues from the textbook or things which she had learned outside the classroom. The data from the dossiers showed that competent learners tended to think highly of the formal classroom instruction and reported its value for their language gain and intercultural competence. On the other hand, less competent learners rarely referred to the value of the classroom instruction, nor the interaction with the teachers, in their dossiers. If they did, they expressed more frustration over the pressure of the workload and the different learning cultures.

> I don't that think I coped with the academic environment at all well. I disliked most things about the teaching methodologies put in practice at [this host] university and I felt that it didn't cater for the way I learnt at all. Also, I never felt like I was valued or treated as an individual. The teachers did not make you feel they wanted you to succeed. (Participant 8)

> To be honest, I think I found it pretty hard to adapt to the workload, the work effort expected and the timetable. In Britain, everything is a lot more laid back and because I was so used to that way of life and coming to China, where you have to work hard to stay on top, was hard for me to adjust and adapt to. (Participant 25)

Both Participants 8 and 25 found it difficult to adapt to the formal classroom learning in China due to different teaching cultures and the heavy workload. This might be partially due to some personal time-management skills; however, their language anxiety and frustration could not be ignored. Some studies have pointed out that poor academic adaptation might contribute to language anxiety as learners are likely to lose the confidence to use the target language and fail to develop more advanced communication skills (Yu, 2010; DeKeyser, 2014). The lack of confidence that these two students displayed in the classroom was, most likely, the reason for their unsatisfactory social interaction with the native speakers outside classroom. There was no surprise when Participant 8 further reported that he had a few Chinese friends but could never develop into any great depth due to his limited Chinese proficiency.

The responses from the competent students and the less competent ones highlighted the role that formal classroom played for YA students in China and how interaction in the classroom could be used as an indicator of successful language learners. Cook (2008) points out the language interaction that occurs in the classroom in most cases involves three moves: initiation, response and feedback. 'IRF as it is known as - starts with teachers taking the initiative by asking questions or making a request which students respond to, and then provide feedback to the students to help them improve.' Students who were more competent often reported how much they benefited from classroom feedback from the teachers. However, the less competent students rarely reported any classroom interactions, and if they did, they tended to focus on the negative side and did not see the feedback in a positive light.

Two of the students above also raised the issue that they experienced classroom anxiety concerning the different teaching methods in the target culture. Student's data showed the intensive language program was more beneficial for learners who were more willing to adjust to the new learning environment. DeKeyser (2014) in his study abroad project pointed out that YA study program can be very beneficial "if the students are willing to engage in the right learning behaviors while overseas." (p. 314) To know the right learning behaviors and endeavor to meet the learning expectation of the target culture are two important qualities if students want to achieve good learning outcome.

The Development of Intercultural Competence

In this section, I shall discuss how intercultural encounters help some participants to shape their intercultural competence and some to reinforce their cultural stereotypes. The data showed that most of the participants used the essentialist view (Holliday, 2011) to interpret their intercultural experiences. The following section contains a number of salient cultural experiences reported by the participants.

Bad Manners Versus Rich Westerners

It has been pointed out that intercultural encounters always involve 'the disquieting tension of the other' (Bredella, 2003). In this study, some of the disquieting tension comes from the so called bad manners. The majority of the participants reported how they were shocked by some 'bad manners' which they encountered in China. The following example demonstrates how a snapshot in a public place in China could challenge the participants' norms of life and bring tension to their intercultural experience.

> After living here for one year, I understand the Beijing way of living. Things are very different from England. Certain things that Beijing people do here were a little surprising to me, for example the spitting, crouching and the hitting of trees; however I could understand after someone explained them to me and I quickly became accustomed to the difference in the way of life … What I consider to be a major cultural difference is that certain things that are done in public in China would never be done in public in Britain. (Participant 25)

When encountering bad manners, Participant 25 treated such behavior as an established national culture which has to be tolerated in order to live in China. The participant used the essentialist view to make sense of the unfamiliar way of life and to see these people's individual behaviors as entirely defined by their culture (Holliday, 2011). After spending a year in China, Participant 25 concluded that Chinese people have a blurred distinction between the private domain and public domain. This observation shows that she had engaged in some reflections on this intercultural experience but was not able to see these manifestations of apparent bad manners as individual behavior and not representative of Chinese culture. Bredella (2003) stated that it is common for us to believe that our own cultural system is natural and rational and superior to others, so to be 'intercultural' requires the participants to explore how they are shaped by their culture and how other cultures are shaped by theirs. The example given above shows that intercultural experience does not necessarily lead to intercultural competence. In some cases, it can reinforce stereotyping

or prejudice. A similar experience was mentioned by Participant 29 who was annoyed by the bad manners she encountered in China, but at the same time, was not comfortable with the stereotypes of rich westerners.

> Chinese men often make a lot of disgusting noises, which annoys me a lot. Sometimes I could not hide my annoyance and showed it on my face. Life in China is so different, but I am getting used to it … Now I am in China, I want to understand more about China and to chat without using a dictionary all the time. I want to integrate into the culture and not to live like a rich westerner. (Participant 29)

Participant 29 was not aware that she was giving labels to the people she met in China, but was aware that some Chinese people stereotype westerners as 'rich westerners'. She was determined to move from her co-nation circle to the local circle in order to change the stereotype. Based on year abroad study data, Coleman (2013) developed a concentric circle model to map out students' progression in the social network. It comprises co-nations (socialize with friends from your own county), to a wider context with other out-group members (often other international students) and move toward native speakers of the target culture. The findings of this study shows that most of the students' social circle fit into Colman's concentric model. However, it has to be pointed out in the context of studying abroad in China that the local circle can be divided into at least two: A Chinese-speaking circle and an English-speaking circle. As discussed earlier about having a part-time job as a learning strategy, while some students reported that the part-time job helped them enhance their Chinese proficiency and cultural awareness, others, despite working alongside the locals, did not make much progress in language learning because they mainly worked in an English-speaking circle.

English as a lingua franca across the globe has made English the most popular foreign language in China. For a rapidly developing country like China, the use of English as a medium can be seen in the workplace and education system in China. Henry (2016) in his paper 'the local purpose of a Global language: English as an intracultural communicative medium in China' raised our awareness that speaking English in China was not just for intercultural communication, but also for intracultural communication as it

allowed its speakers to construct a modern and cosmopolitan identity. The new identity acquired by the English speakers of Chinese matches the image of the rich westerners mentioned by participant 29. The stereotypical view of westerners being associated with wealth and modernity is still prevalent in Asia. For example, Ladegaard and Cheng (2014) in their study revealed that Hong Kong university students naturally placed the American and European students at the top of the social hierarchy and felt inferior to them, while at the same time placed themselves above fellow students from China. Holliday (2011) pointed out that 'ideological imaginations of culture very often lead to the demonization of a particular foreign Other' (p. 1), whereas the image of westerners in Asia often leads to the 'divine' image of a particular foreign 'Other'. The influence of the western imperialism may be dying in the twenty-first century, but some of its legacy is still there. How westerners are constructed in Asia is an interesting issue and deserves further study in the future.

 Contrary to the essentialist view discussed above, a few students from families with a Chinese heritage were able to view the perceived bad manners within a wider social and historical context and developed a sense of empathy:

 I used to criticise China for being so uncivilized, but now I have changed my attitude. I know I have opportunities which they don't have. I believe Chinese people will be more and more civilized. I think I have no problem working in China. (Participant 5)

 I noticed that my feelings were definitely different from (those of) my English classmates who were also studying in Shanghai, and when we discussed matters like this, they would always complain. They simply didn't understand why Chinese people would do such things, but I on the other hand would actually feel very sad and sympathetic towards them. As soon as I think about the fact that that generation was my mum's generation, my heart would ache tremendously. (Participant 45)

 Both of these participants showed the capacity to reflect on the complexity behind the perceived bad manners from a different timescale and developed a sense of empathy. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of other people, is essential to successful communication,

but it can be difficult to achieve. By realizing that 'I have something which they don't have', Participant 5 was able to move from being ethnocentric to being sensitive to a different culture, and a few of the participants had developed a sense of connection to the history and space of the target culture, which are important aspects of a learner's construction of a sense of self (Kramsch, 2008).

Cultural Traits Versus Cultural Social Interaction

When they encountered something different from their own values or beliefs, the participants had a tendency to label it as 'Chinese culture'. The term 'culture' seemed to give the participants a way to develop their imagination about what Chinese culture is like and to find an easy answer to cultural conflicts. Dervin and Machart (2015) observed that the term 'culture' tends to prescribe how individuals should be seen, met and understood, rather than recognizing who they are as an individual Self. The following comment is a good example:

> I found that Chinese people do not like confrontation, but they like to gossip in their own group, which I don't quite understand. (Participant 40)

Participant 40 grouped all Chinese into the category of gossiping and avoiding confrontation. There is a clear line between 'us' and 'other' in this comment. One might ask, 'Are all Chinese the same?' The data from the dossiers show that when they first arrived in China, the participants generally assessed their knowledge of Chinese culture loosely based on Fan's 'set of core values that underlines social interaction among the ordinary Chinese people' (Fan, 2000, p. 4). They were aware of the importance of guanxi (personal connection or networking) and kinship, obligation to one's family, hospitality to guests and so on. Over time, those who had limited contact with Chinese people did not change their perception of Chinese culture. In contrast, those who

reported having several Chinese friends and meeting them regularly showed a deepening understanding of the variation and dynamic in the target culture.

> I think the culture in China and in my country is different. Although Chinese people are still very traditional, young people in Beijing are different. I think they are very positive and open-minded. (Participant 24)

The ability to see the differences among young people in China shows that Participant 24 had made an effort to understand the individuals in the society and is able to see culture in the plural. Some participants who appreciated the cultural diversity showed more orientation toward integrating into the local cultures. A good example is Participant 22, who made the effort to learn Chinese pastimes such as drinking tea and playing *Mahjong* (a Chinese board game) in order to be able to socialize with his Chinese friends and with local people.

> I am learning how to have the same hobbies as the Chinese such as chatting, using social media and shopping on Chinese websites. I am drinking Chinese tea and have also purchased a Chinese tea set. I would also like to learn Chinese chess and *Mahjong* because a lot of Chinese people love them. (Participant 22)

Developing the same hobbies as the Chinese gave Participant 22 sufficient contact with native speakers. His hard work paid off at the end of his YA study as he was one of those who showed a tremendous improvement in his Chinese proficiency and his cultural competence. Similarly, Participant 15 was aware that in daily life some appellations can play an important part in smoothing interpersonal relationships, such as the use of *Shifu* ('master') in Chinese.

> I have noticed a lot of people like to be called *Shifu* such as taxi drivers, waiters, pharmacists and so on. When I call them *Shifu*, they are very pleased, especially taxi drivers. It works very well in Beijing and it helps me to improve interpersonal relationships. (Participant 15)

Shifu is an appellation that the students had learned in their first-year textbook for addressing a taxi driver. It is a term that originally referred to Kung Fu masters but now is commonly used as a polite form to address skilled workers. In contrast to the bad manners discussed earlier, Participant 15 was aware that good manners are valued in Chinese society and can serve to lubricate social interaction. Through their proactive socio-cultural strategies, Participants 22 and 15 had learned how to connect with the locals and build up a good relationship with them. Their proactive attitude helped them to gain a greater understanding of the Chinese people around them, and their reflection on the cultural interaction demonstrated that they had acquired this flexible capacity to read people and situations through their own experience. Kramsch (2008) commented that there is a need to develop in our students 'a more flexible capacity to read people, situations and events based on a deep understanding of the historical and subjective dimensions of human experience' (p. 391).

Chinese Teachers Versus British Teachers

The participants generally reported that Chinese teachers were good at delivering knowledge and structuring the teaching, but that they were stricter than their teachers in the UK and they were not good at giving compliments. For example, Participant 22 pointed out that his teachers did not sell a 'praise sandwich':

> Chinese education is different from British. Sometimes I feel that although I tried hard, I still did not succeed. This is not true, but I feel more pressured here. Teachers here always said, "You are wrong" or "Try and you will be better next time". They don't say: "You are very good, almost there". This is very different from the western style of a 'praise sandwich' (praise, suggestions for improvement and positive feedback). (Participant 22)

As a competent learner, Participant 22 sometimes found it frustrating to face the Chinese praising culture. The role of a teacher in China is traditionally regarded as that of a father, the head of a family, a respected and authoritarian figure who has the paramount duty of giving rightful

guidelines and correcting students' mistakes. The intention is good but the practice may be frustrating to students from other cultures. Even so, it has to be pointed out that the image of a Chinese teacher can appear in various styles. Some participants mentioned a very caring, friendly image of the teachers outside the classroom, more like a friend or a family member, which is different from the formal student/teacher relationship in the UK.

> The relationship between students and teachers is different here. In [this host] university, after the lesson, I often see students and teachers chatting together, or even going for a meal or coffee together. We don't do that in the UK, so I like the Chinese style better. (Participant 17)

Apart from the different student/teacher relationship, some participants were aware that teachers in China have different teaching styles.

> In the UK, the teacher would encourage students to have an open-minded view, but in China, I think the teacher likes to teach students how to think, "you should do this, and do that". Students practise a lot, study a lot, revise new words and so on. Chinese students work harder than the British students, but they are not so sure about what they want in their life. Because they spend so much time studying, they don't have time to understand the outside world. (Participant 36)

As the relationship between students and teachers in China is more like that of a father and son, naturally, teachers feel obligated to tell the students 'the right way' in order to keep them on the right track. The hierarchical system is different from the western style of education where the emphasis is more on a student-centered approach and students and teachers are seen as equal partners, in particular in higher education. In China, due to the pressure of the entrance exam system and the competitive job market, students are expected to work hard and perform well in the exam. These pressures and expectations from teachers and parents certainly have a big impact on the students' world view and social life.

From inside the classroom to outside the classroom, students' accounts on their cultural experiences in China showed that some have developed a positive view of the target culture and increased their awareness of the diversity of Chinese culture, but some have reinforced their stereotypical attitudes of the target culture. The findings of this study recognized the benefits of studying abroad in helping to raise a learner's intercultural awareness but would also like to point out that acquiring intercultural competence takes more than just living abroad. Some studies have acknowledged that the development of intercultural competence cannot occur merely by osmosis in the target culture (Jackson, 2015; Schartner, 2015). For example, Jackson further suggests that 'more interest in international affairs, advanced second language proficiency and more readiness for the global workplace'. (p. 88) The findings of this study echoed the studies by Jackson and Schartner and would like to suggest that the willingness of the participants to speak the target language with the local and having an open-minded attitude to engage in social interactions with the local are both important qualities to gain intercultural competence.

Conclusion

This study has identified the learning strategies used by participants in their YA study period in China and their intercultural experience. The findings show that the competent learners reported using more cognitive strategies (attending lessons and studying on their own) and socio-cultural strategies (networking via the Chinese social media and communicating with speakers of Chinese) than the less competent learners. Almost all of the participants who reported using various cognitive strategies for language gain in the host university were the same group who had achieved good academic results in the home university. A surprising finding was that some participants who had not progressed well in the home university gained a great deal of language confidence and intercultural competence from using various socio-cultural interaction strategies in China. The findings of this study highlight how a YA program can provide learners with more resources to cater for their different needs, in particular for those who achieve better through socio-cultural interaction. It also

informs practitioners in the home university of the need to move from cognitive-based foreign-language instruction to a more socio-cultural interactive teaching methodology. Finally, there was a small group of students who appeared to benefit the least from the YA study in terms of their language gains, and they were the students who used fewer cognitive strategies and showed less contact with native speakers of Chinese.

This study has also highlighted the importance of formal instruction in the YA context. The students' views regarding formal instruction appear to be a good indicator of their language proficiency: competent learners reported more interaction with the teachers and wrote more about how much they had benefited from the program. On the other hand, less competent learners tended to show more frustration toward the different teaching style and the pressure from the intensive teaching. These findings suggest there is a need for closer liaison between the home university and the host university to ensure that the less competent learners receive the appropriate support which they need, and to guide the learners to realize strategies which they can best make use of when they are abroad.

Various intercultural experiences were reported by the participants, who demonstrated different levels of intercultural competence. Some held the essentialist view and saw Chinese culture as a set of fixed traits and rules; others gained more understanding from having social interaction with local people and had strong desire to integrate into the local community. To transform intercultural experience into intercultural competence is a complicated process. It is interesting to see that one group of similar people could show such contrasting views on the same issues. The participants' attitude toward bad manners and good manners in China demonstrates their degree of intercultural competence as some had learned to understand and tolerate perceived bad manners, but others had gone further by showing the capacity and willingness to use good manners to integrate themselves into the local culture. Being intercultural requires the ability to explore how we are shaped by our own culture and how others are shaped by theirs. Some participants who had a Chinese heritage family background or who had more active social interaction with their Chinese friends showed more reflection on their intercultural experiences. Throughout the dossier reports, it was very common for the participants to view their knowledge of Chinese cultural traits

(hardworking, hospitable, gossipy, etc.) as their intercultural competence and to use the essentialist view to label their individual intercultural experiences into national traits. National traits might be a first and easier step toward understanding a new culture, but more steps are necessary to go across the national traits to the individual self in order to achieve intercultural competence.

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