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Language and (Inter)cultural Socialization in Study Abroad (SA) Contexts

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Abstract

Students who participate in a study abroad (SA) program are naturally exposed to new 'ways of being' (e.g., unfamiliar linguistic and cultural practices) and as they adjust to the host environment, they may experience acculturative stress and identity confusion (Jackson 2018, 2020). To better understand the challenges facing second language (L2) SA participants, applied linguists in various parts of the world are conducting introspective studies that seek to identify and make sense of factors that can influence L2 socialization and sojourn outcomes (e.g., language proficiency gains, intercultural competence development) (Iwasaki 2019; Jackson 2019). Their work is providing much-needed direction for pedagogical interventions in SA programs (e.g., pre-departure orientations, language and intercultural transition courses) (Jackson and Oguro 2018; Vande Berg, Paige and Lou 2012). This, in turn, is helping institutions of higher education to realize some of their internationalization goals (e.g., the enhancement of language and intercultural development). After explaining contemporary notions of L2 socialization/acculturation and poststructuralist perspectives on identity, this colloquium presented the key findings of three mixed-method, largely qualitative, longitudinal studies that investigated the L2 socialization and identity reconstruction of participants in various short-term SA programs.

Keywords: Socialization, Pedagogy, Post-structuralism, Identity, Linguistic Anthropology

Introduction and Overview of Symposium Cultural Adjustment of Inbound Non-local Exchange Students in Hong Kong

In the first paper, Jane Jackson, the organizer of the symposium, explained how internationalization policies (implicit or explicit) have compelled many institutions of higher education to increase SA opportunities for their students. Administrators often assume that SA participants will experience significant gains in L2 proficiency and intercultural competence simply by being present in the host speech community; however, recent studies have found that a complex mix of internal and external factors can lead to limited academic and social integration (e.g., Jackson 2018; Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou 2012). Some newcomers quickly adjust to the host environment, while others do not; contrary to their expectations, many end

up spending spend most of their free time with co-nationals and experience little or no gains in intercultural sensitivity or L2 fluency. With these realities in view, a study was undertaken in Hong Kong to better understand the factors that hinder or support the language and (inter)cultural adjustment of non-local exchange students.

Drawing on L2 socialization and social network theories (e.g., Duff 2011, 2012; Jackson 2018) and poststructuralist conceptions of identity (Baxter 2016; Block 2007), this mixed-method study examined the linguistic and (inter)cultural challenges experienced by 92 L2 speakers of English from various countries, who joined an international exchange program at a bilingual (Chinese-English) university in Hong Kong. None had proficiency in Cantonese or Putonghua (Mandarin) and all of them enrolled in English-medium courses. Through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, the participants provided a window into the multifarious elements that appeared to facilitate or impede their socialization and identity reconstruction in the new environment (e.g., the degree of host receptivity, agency, differing amounts of investment in language and intercultural learning, variations in L2 self-efficacy, differences in adaptive stress management strategies). Jackson explained that the findings, which were coded and analyzed with the help of NVivo 11 Pro, provided direction for strategic interventions that could be implemented at the host university to better support the learning and engagement of this population (e.g., informal social English courses, ‘buddy schemes’, intercultural communication courses for both local and non-local students). Suggestions were also offered to guide the pre-sojourn preparation of L2 speakers who decide to join an international exchange program and study in their L2 (e.g., the encouragement of realistic goal-setting, pre-departure exposure to social discourse in the host language, an intercultural communication course). Jackson concluded her presentation by underscoring the vital role that applied linguists/language teachers can play in SA experience, by creating research-inspired pedagogical interventions (e.g., language courses that draw students attention to intercultural and sociopragmatic dimensions of language learning and use). The need for the careful documentation and sharing of these innovations was stressed so that these advances could benefit educators and SA students in many contexts.

The socialization of pre-service English language teachers in a cultural immersion program in England

In the second paper, Chan Sin Yu (Cherry) reported on the language socialization of Hong Kong Chinese pre-service English language teachers (L2 speakers) who participated in an eight-week cultural immersion program in England. Informed by a poststructuralist view of identity (Block 2007) and Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown (2013) L2 identity framework, this study examined the L2 identity developmental trajectories of three participants. Following a mixed-method (largely qualitative), multiple-case study design, the participants’ L2 and (inter)cultural learning experiences were investigated over a nine-month period, with data collection in both Hong Kong and the UK. To better understand the participants’ developmental trajectories, data was amassed before the sojourn, during the SA program, immediately after the sojourn, and four months after their return home. Data included the participants’ pre-and post- immersion reflective essays, semi-structured interviews, sojourn reflective journals, questionnaire surveys, and reports on each participant provided by the host institution. The data was organized and analyzed with the help of the qualitative software program NVivo 11. This process provided

insight into the L2 and intercultural socialization of the participants, as well as their L2 identity development. It was observed that they experienced very different developmental trajectories. A careful review of the coded data underscored the complexity of SA experience. A complex mix of both internal and environmental factors can account for variations in L2 identity development across time and space.

Chan then discussed the theoretical and pedagogical implications of her study. Drawing on the findings and the earlier work of Benson et al. (2013) and other SA scholars (Jackson 2008, 2010, 2012), she presented a theoretical model to illustrate the variables that can impact the L2 identities of SA students. In the presentation, she also offered suggestions to facilitate the preparation and support of student sojourners. In particular, she discussed innovative ways to help pre-service EFL teachers become more actively engaged in the host country so that they more fully benefit from language and (inter)cultural affordances (e.g. pre-sojourn advice, regular debriefing sessions during the sojourn). Finally, Chan identified the limitations of this research and offered suggestions for further research on the L2 identities and socialization of short-term SA students.

The acculturation of Chinese international exchange students in English-speaking countries

In the third and final paper, Tongle Sun shared the preliminary findings of a longitudinal study that investigated the language and intercultural learning of Hong Kong-based Mainland Chinese STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) students who joined a semester-long international exchange program in an English-speaking country (e.g., Canada, the United States). Underpinned by poststructuralist notions of identity (e.g., Benson et al. 2013, Block 2007; Norton 2011) and language socialization (e.g., Duff 2010, 2011, 2012), this longitudinal study tracked the developmental trajectories of seven case participants throughout their SA journey (i.e., before, during, immediately after, and six months after the international exchange experience). Mixed-method data were collected over a sixteen-month period through questionnaire surveys, in-depth semi-structured interviews, sojourn email prompts, and multimodal entries (e.g., sojourn images). NVivo 11 Pro, a qualitative software tool, was used to assist data organization and analysis. A triangulation of the mixed-method data facilitated the identification of individual differences (e.g., sojourn goals, agency, investment, language/intercultural attitudes) and external factors (e.g., host receptivity/access to local communities of practice) that appeared to impact sojourn learning and bring about divergent learning outcomes. Near the end of her presentation, Sun discussed the implications of her findings for pedagogical interventions in SA programs of this nature. In particular, she drew attention to the imperative for focused pre-sojourn preparation and ongoing sojourn support for SA (STEM) students from this region.

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