

**International Students' Language and Culture Learning Experience
in Study Abroad**

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August, 2014

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Acknowledgements

This paper would be not possible without support from my professors, colleagues, friends and family! First and foremost, I am grateful for the mentorship from my exceptional advisor Dr. Martha Bigelow for her continued support and expertise over these three years. I still remember being inspired by her teaching at the STARTALK workshop in the summer of 2010, and could not have imagined having the privilege of being her PhD student today! Dr. Bigelow's genuine passion for academic research and a positive attitude towards life have profound impact on me! I also want to thank my three other committee members, Dr. Cynthia Lewis, Dr. Diane Tedick and Dr. Gerald Fry. They are not only renowned scholars in academia but also my role models. I have deep respect for their rigorous scholarship and global perspectives.

You would not be reading such informing stories if it were not for the ten participants in the research. I would like to thank my participants for sharing their stories with trust in my project and me! Their stories bring back many memories of my own study abroad experience and I really appreciate the candid conversations with them. Additionally, I also would like to extend my gratitude to the support from the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP) for giving me permission to contact their students. Thank-you goes to all instructors who allowed me to observe their classes! In particular, I want to thank Dr. Mike Anderson for his administrative support and academic advice from our first meeting; also Bethany Peters for welcoming me into her wonderful classes for recruitment and volunteering.

Over these three years of PhD life, I have been fortunate to receive continued Graduate Assistantship from the Confucius Institute Office at the University of Minnesota. I want to thank my supervisors and colleagues there for this remarkable experience. I would like to acknowledge Director Joan Brzezinski for her faith and support, Emily Hanson and Emily Ruskin for their mentorship and invaluable friendship. This GA opportunity has allowed me to be engaged in Chinese language and culture industry and enhanced my multiple skills for my future career.

The PhD program is an unforgettable experience in my life also because of my wonderful cohort and great friends I have made in the program. They are all amazing, talented and caring people who motivated me to be more insightful, enthusiastic and diligent. My friends outside academia have also supported me over the years, and I cherish every opportunity to hang out with them to talk about small things in life and laugh together!

Last but not least, I want to thank my family in China and the United States for their selfless love and support. My parents and two elder sisters did not have much education and may not understand my experience in many aspects, but I have immense gratitude for their dedication and sacrifice to support me for the last three decades! My in-laws gave me their wonderful son, welcomed me to their family, make me feel loved and exemplify what good people are! In particular, I want to thank my husband Kevin Clancy for being there for me since 2002. Thank you for being tolerant with my changeable mood and always cheering me up with your optimism, love and Irish wit! My

achievements are shared with him and I could not possibly ask for a better partner to travel life's journey with!

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family in China, including my parents and my two elder sisters. It is also dedicated to my husband Kevin Clancy.

Abstract

This dissertation is a study of Chinese students' language and cultural learning experience through mediational means in a study abroad context. While there is extensive quantitative research to measure linguistic gains *or* cultural adjustment, there is limited research on study abroad participants' perspectives on their language *and* cultural learning experience through a sociocultural lens. This dissertation contributes new knowledge in Asian students' sojourn experience.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine, from Chinese students' perspectives, what mediational resources were used and how they used the materials to foster learning in a study abroad context. Data sources included in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations, focus group discussion, social media post and other documents.

Sociocultural theory, mediation in particular, was adopted as the theoretical framework for this study because it resonates with my assumption that learning takes place in interaction between individuals and other materials and other people. Study abroad contexts are unique in offering multiple forms of resources that can be similar or different from the students' background. International students' interaction with materials and people in this study abroad community can be a mediational process that leads to learning. It also fits in my purpose of the study to examine the learning *process* but not the product. This study was not to measure the students' linguistic outcomes or cultural skills; instead, it was to attain more in-depth understanding of their personal experience in learning English and multiple cultures in the United States.

Findings show that participants used multiple resources to mediate learning, including tools such as textbooks and on-line technology and semiotic systems such as language, email communication and peer review. Language, including dialogues with other people and private speech, stood out as powerful mediation means. Data also showed that emotions, identities and motivation played a crucial role in mediation. They not only influenced participants' choice of materials but also became mediational means themselves. These findings have significant theoretical and practical implications for study abroad students, instructors and program administrators. Students are encouraged to become reflective learners and to raise awareness of selecting multiple resources to mediate learning through various strategies. For instructors, this study also shows the importance of various pedagogies to address students' need and the significance of understanding students as individuals in a broader sociocultural context. It is also suggested that training, guidance and mentorship should be offered through the entire study abroad journey and beyond.

This project confirms findings from many existing papers that study abroad is a complex experience. There are multiple affordances for learning but there is no definite causal relationship with linguistic gains. Students' interaction with mediational means can produce learning. It also extends the discussion of mediational tools and signs, by showing evidence of how emotions, identities and motivations mediated learning. This study exemplifies efforts to break the *either-language-or-culture* dichotomy that is often seen as the focus of research, and to inspire more future research on *both* aspects.

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List of Abbreviations

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development

CM: China-Minnesota program

ELP: English Language Program

Chapter 1. Introduction

Globalization, economic development and easier transportation have led to an increasing number of study abroad programs serving millions of students. According to Institute of International Education (IIE), in 2010-2011, over 273,000 US students studied abroad for academic credit, an increase by 1.3% over the previous year and this amount has more than tripled over the last two decades. In the meantime, the United States stands firm as the top country of popularity for international students to pursue their further study. Open Doors data (IIE, 2013) report that over the last 13 years (2000-2013), the number of international students studying in the United States rose from 582,996 to 819,644. In 2012/13, the number increased 7.2% to a record high and presumably continues to rise. Figure 1 shows the trend of number of international students in the U.S. over the last 60 academic years.

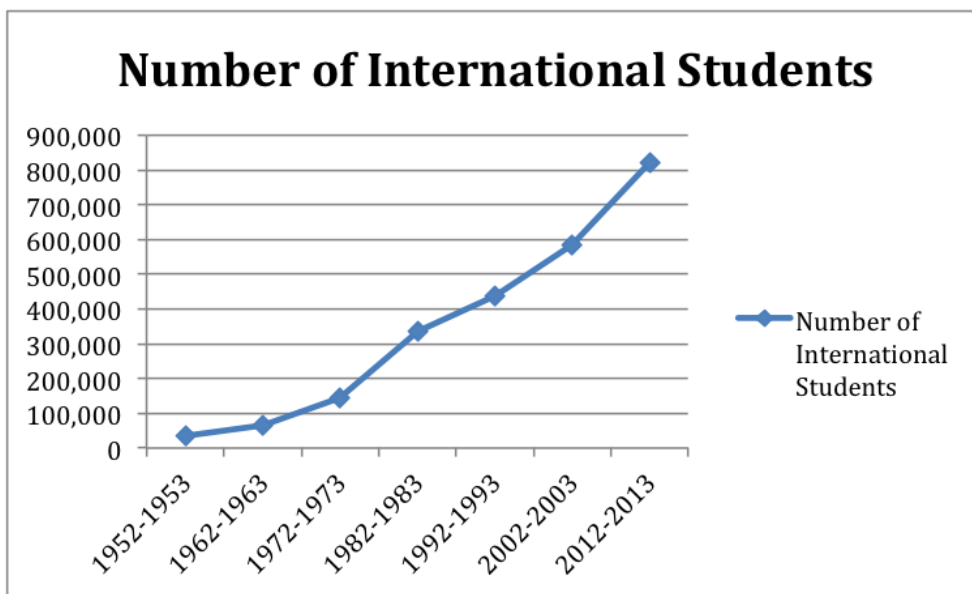


Figure 1: The Trend of Number of International Students in the U.S. (IIE, 2013)

Around the globe, China is the top sending place of origin of international students in the United States. China’s economic development is reflected in the skyrocketing number of students pursuing their study in other countries. The economic reform in late 1970s and early 1980s not only resulted in a great economic leap within China but also allowed more Chinese families to be able to afford to send their children to study abroad. *Open Doors: Report on international Educational Exchange*, an annual publication by IIE, records that over the last three decades China ranks as a leading sender of international students for three periods: 1988/89-1994/95, 1998/99-2000/01, and 2009/10 till present. Figure 2 presents the number of students coming from China since 1995/96.

| Year | # of Students From China | % Change from Previous Year | # of U.S. Study Abroad Students Going to China |
|-------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| 2012/13 | 235,597 | 21.4% | n/a |
| 2011/12 | 194,029 | 23.1% | 14,887(up 2.0%) |
| 2010/11 | 157,558 | 23.5% | 14,596 |
| 2009/10 | 127,628 | 29.9% | 13,910 |
| 2008/09 | 98,235 | 21.1% | 13,674 |
| 2007/08 | 81,127 | 19.8% | 13,188 |
| 2006/07 | 67,723 | 8.2% | 11,064 |
| 2005/06 | 62,582 | 0.1% | 8,830 |
| 2004/05 | 62,523 | 1.2% | 6,391 |
| 2003/04 | 61,765 | -4.6% | 4,737 |
| 2002/03 | 64,757 | 2.4% | 2,493 |
| 2001/02 | 63,211 | 5.5% | 3,911 |
| 2000/01 | 59,939 | 10.0% | 2,942 |
| 1999/00 | 54,466 | 6.8% | 2,949 |
| 1998/99 | 51,001 | 8.6% | 2,278 |
| 1997/98 | 46,958 | 10.5% | 2,116 |
| 1996/97 | 42,503 | 7.3% | 1,627 |
| 1995/96 | 39,613 | - | 1,396 |

Figure 2: Number of Students from and Going to China from 1995/96-2012/13 (IIE, 2013)

In 2013, China retained its leading place of sender for the fourth year in a row and takes up over one fourth of the total international students' enrollment in the United States, as shown in Figure 3.

TOP PLACES OF ORIGIN of International Students

| Rank | Place of Origin | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | % of Total | % Change |
|-------------|------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| | WORLD TOTAL | 764,495 | 819,644 | 100.0 | 7.2 |
| 1 | China | 194,029 | 235,597 | 28.7 | 21.4 |
| 2 | India | 100,270 | 96,754 | 11.8 | -3.5 |
| 3 | South Korea | 72,295 | 70,627 | 8.6 | -2.3 |
| 4 | Saudi Arabia | 34,139 | 44,566 | 5.4 | 30.5 |
| 5 | Canada | 26,821 | 27,357 | 3.3 | 2.0 |
| 6 | Taiwan | 23,250 | 21,867 | 2.7 | -5.9 |
| 7 | Japan | 19,966 | 19,568 | 2.4 | -2.0 |
| 8 | Vietnam | 15,572 | 16,098 | 2.0 | 3.4 |
| 9 | Mexico | 13,893 | 14,199 | 1.7 | 2.2 |
| 10 | Turkey | 11,973 | 11,278 | 1.4 | -5.8 |
| 11 | Brazil | 9,029 | 10,868 | 1.3 | 20.4 |
| 12 | Germany | 9,347 | 9,819 | 1.2 | 5.0 |
| 13 | United Kingdom | 9,186 | 9,467 | 1.2 | 3.1 |
| 14 | Nepal | 9,621 | 8,920 | 1.1 | -7.3 |
| 15 | Iran | 6,982 | 8,744 | 1.1 | 25.2 |
| 16 | France | 8,232 | 8,297 | 1.0 | 0.8 |
| 17 | Hong Kong | 8,032 | 8,026 | 1.0 | -0.1 |
| 18 | Indonesia | 7,131 | 7,670 | 0.9 | 7.6 |
| 19 | Nigeria | 7,028 | 7,316 | 0.9 | 4.1 |
| 20 | Thailand | 7,626 | 7,314 | 0.9 | -4.1 |
| 21 | Malaysia | 6,743 | 6,791 | 0.8 | 0.7 |
| 22 | Colombia | 6,295 | 6,543 | 0.8 | 3.9 |
| 23 | Venezuela | 6,281 | 6,158 | 0.8 | -2.0 |
| 24 | Kuwait | 3,722 | 5,115 | 0.6 | 37.4 |
| 25 | Spain | 4,924 | 5,033 | 0.6 | 2.2 |

Figure 3: Top 25 Places of Origin of International Students, 2011/12-2012/13 (IIE, 2013)

The benefits and risks of study abroad have been under discussion for decades. On one hand, extensive studies have evidenced the benefits of studying abroad. From an educational institution's stance, international students not only contribute economic

value, bring global perspectives and diversity, as well as support U.S. innovation by contributing their exceptional knowledge to science and engineering causes (NAFSA, 2013). From the international students' point of view, study abroad is an extraordinary opportunity to gain language skills, intercultural competence, global engagement, critical thinking, creativity and a sense of accomplishment (Carlson, Burn, Useem & Yachimowitz, 1991; Freed, 1998; Gmelch, 1997; King & Young, 1994; McCabe, 1994; Milstein, 2005). On the other hand, studies reveal that study abroad is not always a haven for learning because learners do encounter challenges. One challenge is the difficulty that learners have to establish contact with native speakers, especially depending on whether the study abroad program is individualized for learners; another challenge is the learners' desire to interact with other learners who speak the same first language (L1) for reasons such as homesickness, anxiety in the new environment, and shyness (Barron, 2006). How students balance their engagement in in-class instruction and out-of-class interaction is also an indicator of their knowledge development. Scholars have argued that some students do not benefit as much linguistically as expected during study abroad due to their assumption that socializing with native speakers is the panacea to develop skills; therefore, these students may miss out precious learning opportunities in classroom environment (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995; Wilkinson, 1998).

In study abroad research, sociocultural theory is a useful lens because it gives primary importance to learning as a mediated action through cultural artifacts in social, cultural, historical settings. From sociocultural perspectives, cognition, consciousness, mediation and artifacts are all socially and culturally constituted (Vygotsky, 1978;

Wertsch, 1991). This means that individuals' higher-level cognitive development is achieved through interaction with other people and through utilizing tools (e.g., pens, books, computers) in a society. However, how to interact with others and the meaning of tools are all culturally influenced. Take classroom learning for instance. In a classroom with local and international students, students from various backgrounds may interact with the professor differently; some prefer direct discussion while others choose to listen without much questioning. They may also treat note-taking differently; some prefer to write down their own thoughts while others copy everything on the blackboard. These practices all lead to higher cognitive development but the process may vary due to their history in learning, social environment for up-bringing, cultural perspectives and a wide range of individual differences.

A sociocultural theoretical framework fits with this complex, situated topic and aligns with my belief that learning does not take place isolated within individual's mind. Instead, learning is a social act and a developmental process. In particular, the concept of mediation is valuable in understanding how learners utilize physical tools (i.e., computers, phones, people) and semiotic systems (i.e., language, number system, colors) to work within the real world and transform their behaviors. Mediation tools and signs are culturally shaped artifacts that help individuals transform reality and in the meantime change themselves (Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Whittaker, 2008). How does this mediation happen? What does mediation look like in reality? These questions intrigue me to further explore. Inspired by previous scholarship and by gaps in what is known about study abroad, I conducted this study to explore the role of mediation

and mediated learning in a study abroad context and discuss the importance of using learners' perspectives to build on the knowledge base of study abroad.

It is important to note that this dissertation takes a broad view of the term *study abroad* and thus incorporates both degree and non-degree activities that take place outside the participants' home country. The study abroad context described here follows the rule of combining "language and/or content learning in a formal classroom setting along with immersion in the native speech community" (Freed, 1995b, p. 5). It also adopts the term *cultures* instead of *culture* because the plural form can better reflect the multifaceted nature of culture. According to Hall, culture is a set of social practice that is produced and exchanged in various ways, such as personal and social interaction, everyday rituals, identities, narratives and rules. He also raised awareness to examine cultures through critical lenses to consider the connection between cultures and political and economic factors (Hall, 1997). The Hall notion reveals the sophisticated layers of cultures. I intend this distinction to acknowledge that there is no one definite or fixed culture in either the host or the sending countries; instead, culture is multiple, multidimensional and dynamic in all places. This dissertation investigates the many different levels and aspects of cultures within the whole (academic and personal) of a study abroad experience.

1.1. Statement of the problem

While existing scholarship has created a profound knowledge foundation in the field of study abroad in relation to language and culture learning, there exist limitations that should be taken into consideration for future research.

(1) Target language and audience: Most studies seek to examine English-speaking students' studying other languages such as Spanish, French and German (i.e., Dolby, 2005; Milstein, 2005; Teichler & Steube, 1991). Comparatively less light is shed on international students' learning abroad experience in English-speaking countries. In other words, a large body of literature seeks to understand American students' or English-speaking students' study abroad experience while not much can be found related to a more diverse student body.

(2) Research methods: most of studies are still based on quantitative methods, including many influential studies in this field. For example, Carroll's (1967) study of language proficiency of 2,782 college seniors majored in various languages provided the first major analysis of benefits of study abroad; however, Freed critiqued its major limitation as "exclusive reliance on test scores to measure linguistic skills" (Freed, 1995b, p. 9). Another study in point is Dyson's (1998) study to assess 229 British students' listening and speaking skills after spending a year in France, Germany or Spain. Freed argued that the study "lacks comparative data on students who had not been abroad" which makes it impossible to compare study abroad students' linguistic gains with those who have studied an extra year at home (Freed, 1995b, p. 9). In short, Freed indicated that research findings were problematic because the data were based on only test-scores achieved in the study abroad contexts and no comparative data or control group were

included in the study. Freed's analysis raised the problem of oversimplified and product-oriented understandings of language and culture learning in the field of study abroad. Even though many recent studies place more emphasis on the process of learners' improvement and development and seek to understand study abroad in a more complex lens (i.e., Engle & Engle, 2004; Ginsberg, Robin & Wheeling, 1992; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004), their studies are survey-based and aim to quantify changes that occur during the learning abroad period.

Admittedly, there are a growing number of qualitative studies in this field. For example, Ryan and Lafford (1992) compared the acquisition order of Spanish copulas (*ser* and *estar*) in a study abroad setting and in a language classroom setting, with a conclusion that study abroad allowed students to have exposure to more and more natural input. Freed applauded the qualitative study as representing "an important step in the direction of a more complete understanding of the impact of study abroad experience on students' language learning" (Freed, 1995b, p. 12). However, in contrast to large number of quantitative studies, there is a need to call for more qualitative and ethnographic type of inquiries to explore the study abroad topic in more depth, and through the lens of individuals who have a study abroad experience.

(3) Research focus: most studies examine the effectiveness of programs, language production, or structured instruction; not much research is on learners' own mediated learning. Although there are studies on social interaction and learning in a study abroad context, there is not much discussion of how students process these interactions to influence their learning. In other words, students are still not placed at the center of the

research to see how language and culture learning happens. Nor is there substantial research that inspects both language and culture as a combined, integrative experience from the students' stance. Current research sometimes focuses students' perspectives either on language learning or culture learning; however, language and culture learning often occur simultaneously. How learners develop their learning in both aspects and how they reconcile their multiple learning is a wealth of knowledge to be discovered. These knowledge gaps are the focus of this dissertation project.

1.2. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to examine international students' mediated language and culture learning experiences in a study abroad context. The research focus lies in how the learners interact with symbolic systems and tools in learning English and cultures. Using qualitative case studies of eleven Chinese sojourners, together with in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations and focus group discussion, this study seeks to uncover the participants' study abroad stories and tap into the complexity underlying their experience. This study aims to expand our current knowledge of how sojourners mediate their learning through a variety of resources and to enhance our understanding of the various sociocultural influences, including the communities with which they interact, diverse contexts, program variables and individual differences. This research purpose leads to the following research questions:

1. What mediational means do international students use in study abroad settings to adjust to a new social and academic context?

2. Why do they choose to use these means?
3. How do these international students interact with the mediational means?
4. What influences international students' mediated learning in study abroad?

The goal of this study is not to measure the learners' linguistic outcomes or cultural skills; instead, it is to attain more in-depth understanding of learners' personal experience in learning English and multiple cultures in the United States. This is not to diminish the importance of the quantifiable linguistic gains or cultural competence, but using a qualitative inquiry approach to accentuate the interconnectedness between learning a language and learning a culture within a context. I agree with Genc and Bada (2005) that "Acquiring a new language means a lot more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon" (p. 73). Language learning should be considered within culture learning, and vice versa. This study is to discover how these two aspects intersect within students' study abroad experience. The purpose of the study is to understand the multiple ways students have discovered to have meaningful study abroad experience, to examine participants' experience from various theoretical concepts, and to inform programs, curriculum, and services in general for study abroad students.

1.3. Significance of the study

The significance of this study is threefold. To begin with, this study distinguishes itself from many current studies that adopt quantitative methods to present statistical evidence; instead, it adopts qualitative approaches to provide organic perspectives of the learners, which offers pedagogical significance to both language and content instructors.

Many studies concerning international students' issues adopt quantitative methods, using statistics as evidence, such as a study by Lee and his colleagues (2000) on Korean students academic adjustment in Canada, and the study by Zhao and his colleagues that compares international and American students' engagement in study (Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005). Despite the illuminating statistics, learners' voices are not heard. My stance is that students are agents of action and their own learning process within complex social settings. They do not act in a vacuum but in a social, historical and cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertch, 2009). They play an important role to make learning happen and to make learning successful, but with contextual limitations or affordances. It is worthwhile to look at how learners learn, what struggles they encounter and how they reconcile various conflicts. Both their successes and struggles are valuable information for educators to revise curricular and provide learning support.

Secondly, this study contributes to the research line of examining learners' holistic experience in *both* language and culture when they study abroad. There is extensive literature on language outcomes and culture *separately*, but not many studies explore how learners feel about their growth in *both* aspects at the same time. As Coleman holds,

To limit residence abroad research to the linguistic outcomes is to distort the experience. Language skills are not merely mechanical: sociocultural and intercultural competence are essential elements of the true linguistic proficiency which residence abroad is expected to enhance. (1998, p. 197)

This statement reminds us to consider students' holistic experience in study abroad.

Language learning and culture learning are interdependent within study abroad contexts.

Better understanding of the target culture is useful in enhancing linguistic proficiency.

This study serves as an example of exploring both lines of development among learners, in order to enrich our understanding of study abroad.

Thirdly, this study embodies the importance of engaging international students to become reflective learners. Compared with literature on American students' study abroad experience, there is a dearth in researching international students' experience in English-speaking countries, in particular how they mediate their own learning, meaning what they do to advance their own development in both language and cultures. Current studies related to international students' study abroad experience in western countries concern the following broad issues: (1) Students' academic adjustment and achievement (i.e., Cheng, Myles & Curtis, 2004; Johnson, 1988; Gu & Maley, 2008; Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999); (2) suggestions for program administrators to retain international students (i.e., Lin & Yi, 1997; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Yen & Stevens, 2004); and (3) suggestions to educators for optimal practice (i.e. Holmes, 2004; Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Lee, 1997).

Admittedly, there is some research on international students' own reflection on their study abroad experience, such as works by Lewthwaite (1996) and Senyshyn, Warford and Zhan (2000). However, these two studies elicited learners' perspectives to identify factors that hinder their intercultural adjustment and the results included English proficiency, gender, social skills, academic status and so forth. These studies successfully displayed the issues and factors but failed to explore what learners do to advance their own learning. Stoyhoff (1997) did discover that students who integrated social assistance

into learning performed better in study when he was probing into factors associated with international students' academic achievement; nevertheless, that was only a small part of the research result. Frequently asked questions include *What are some of the challenges?* and *What can we do to help the study abroad students?* However, not many researchers ask *What have the students done to help with their own language and culture learning in the study abroad context?* There is a shortage in understanding how international students employ study abroad experience to enhance language learning and intercultural competence. In this regard, this study distinguishes itself in not only discussing Chinese students' experience in various study abroad contexts but also engaging the learners to reflect on their own sojourn – academic and personal. Reflection itself is a good learning opportunity for students to grow a better understanding of their own unique background, learning habits and of themselves as individuals.

1.4. Outline of the dissertation

Chapter 2 presents the literature review and theoretical framework. It reviews the background and current research in the line of study abroad and learning, and examines the value of sociocultural perspectives on this topic. Chapter 3 discusses the ethnographic case study methodology and elaborates the methods adopted to collect and analyze data for this project. Chapters 4 to 6 present the findings through individual data analysis and cross-case comparison. Chapter 7 offers further discussion of the findings, implications to various stakeholders and conclusion of the project.

Chapter 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter consists of two main sections. The first section reviews the extensive literature on study abroad as a learning context in relation to language learning and cultural learning. It starts with existing research on both aspects and underscores some established findings as well as unsolved problems. Then it discusses emerging attention on learners' variables in the research field. At the end of the review, I will problematize current scholarship and revisit the rationale for this study. The second section describes the theoretical framework adopted in this study. I chose sociocultural theory, mediation in particular, because it elucidates why sociocultural perspectives provide an optimal theoretical framework for the current research.

2. 1. Literature review

To begin with, I will examine current research focus on second language learning; then I will discuss the research focus shift over the last few decades and the influence of study abroad on language learning. Thirdly, I will investigate different models adopted to examine study abroad and cultural awareness, and I will discuss students' cultural growth in study abroad contexts. Finally, I will explore literature concentrated on learners in study abroad environments focusing on learner differences. This section will end with a summary of what is needed to expand the current knowledge on study abroad experiences.

2.1.1. Research on language learning

How is language learned? Is language learning a cognitive or social process? These questions have been discussed and debated over the last few decades; and the major argument centers cognitive-versus-sociocultural nature of language learning and use. This traditional dichotomist view yields to two major types of studies: some researchers investigating linguistic-cognitive issues with quantitative research methods and some others examining the social context of activity with qualitative research methods (Hulstijn et al., 2014). While “many researchers in L2 learning and teaching are probably convinced that a wide gap between two camps is unavoidable” (Hulstijn et al., 2014, p. 5), a collection of renowned SLA researchers call for further discussions at conferences and journals on whether there is a cognitive-sociocultural gap and how to bridge the gap if there is any.

In a recent publication *Bridging the gap. Cognitive and social approaches to research in second language learning and teaching* (Hulstijn et al., 2014), prominent SLA researchers around the globe collaborated their efforts and expertise to discuss these pressing issues: How do we bridge the gaps in SLA? What roles are cognitive approaches and social approaches in research in second language learning and teaching? What are researchers’ stances in choosing methodology to conduct SLA research? While Ellis (Hulstijn et al., 2014, pp. 42-48) sees language learning and use at once cognitive and social, he argues that the multiple social and cognitive dimensions of language learning and use require different methods, so he calls for theoretical integration and interaction across disciplines to study SLA. By comparison, Lantolf adopts Vygotskian sociocultural theory to provide an alternative understanding of this cognitive-social gap. According to

Lantolf, Vygotsky would not consider building the bridge as a solution to the problem “because no matter how much traffic crosses the bridges, the abyss is still there” (p. 10). Lantolf asserts the importance of “recognizing that the dialectic between social activity and mental activity is mediated by language and cultural artifacts” (p. 49). In other words, sociocultural theory provides a holistic view to see the interaction between cognition, sociocultural influence and artifacts to collaboratively foster learning and development. Although authors in this publication offer different interpretations and bridges to the gap, they agree there “there is no single, monolithic social-cognitive gap in L2 learning and teaching research, or at least there need not or ought not to be a gap” (p. 54).

These researchers did not offer specific advice on how to approach research in L2 teaching and learning; instead, they contributed insights at the ontological and epistemological level to this discussion. Their stances may vary, but one notion shared by many is the importance of researching language learning and use in a context. Lantolf stated, “With regard to language learning and teaching, we would expect that, under different social circumstances, language development would vary” (Hulstijn et al., 2014, p. 14). Because of the dialectic nature of learning, he sees “no opposition between nature and nurture” (p. 15). Lantolf and Vygotskian perspectives hold that human thinking has its source in a world of human sociocultural activity, and learning takes place with assistance of artifacts that are culturally formed; therefore, it is necessary to study language learning within the contexts where it happens. Ellis echoes the social nature of language learning, “The meaning of words in languages and how they can be used in

combination depends on the perception and categorization of the real world around us” (p. 40). Authors did not elaborate the contexts of language learning and use, which is not the focus of their publication; however, I resonate with the important role of contexts in students’ language learning by providing affordances and limitations at the same time.

In fact, research on language learning in relation to contexts is not a new concept. In 1960s, Hymes started to navigate the external influence on language learning, and the meaning of contexts has evolved over time. Hymes (1962) discusses eight factors that influence speech events, including setting, participants, end or purpose, act sequence, key verbal and nonverbal manner, instrumentalities, norms of interaction and interpretation, and genre. Hymes’s contextual factors were instrumental and adopted by many second language acquisition researchers for many years. In 2002, Batstone (2002) argues that these are *external* context, which means these are the features of the speaking context. Batstone further stresses that context should include one more dimension: *the dynamic context*. The dynamic context is more related to the language learner’s inner orientation or purpose for learning. In other words, Batstone holds that both *external environment* and learners’ *internal purpose* for learning need to be considered to explain his or her language acquisition. Batstone (2002) distinguishes two types of contexts: *communicative* and *learning*. The former context refers to those where learners use the second language for information exchange and social interaction while the latter refers to those contexts where language is expected to be taught as input and practiced as output with teachers’ assistance. While Batstone defines context by the role of language use, Freed and his colleagues expand the contexts to more a diverse realm. Their concept of context includes

exclusive technological academic contexts, unstructured learning settings in a native speech community, formal academic language classrooms and hybrid settings that integrate formal instruction and out-of-class opportunities (Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004).

Contexts are taken into consideration by SLA researchers with various theoretical stances. For instance, Burr (2003) applied a social constructionist framework to argue that knowledge is learned with influence from historic and cultural variables; drawing on a sociocultural perspective. Similarly, Gee (1992) and Atkinson (2002) adopted a sociocognitive perspective to encourage researchers to connect language acquisition with experience, cultural knowledge and emotion. Lantolf and associates, taking on Vygotskian perspectives, contended that language learning occurs as a result of mentorship and social contact with other people (Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

Recognizing the importance of contexts leads to navigating the types of contexts for students to learn languages. Collentine and Freed (2004) reviewed a range of studies and summarized three major types of contexts, in which high school or university level students typically find themselves: the traditional language classroom in the L1 country, intensive immersion programs in the L1 country such as summer language programs, and study abroad programs. If Bastone's criteria are used as a reference, study abroad is unique as "a hybrid communicative-learning context" (Collentine & Freed, 2004, p. 156) because study abroad experience normally involves formal classroom learning and social interactive communication. The distinctiveness of study abroad as a learning context has

inspired a wealth of studies on language learning in this particular setting. The following section is to review such studies and to point out what is in need.

2.1.2. Research focus in study abroad and language

The foci of research on study abroad and language learning have evolved over the last three decades. Before the 1990s, the majority of studies almost exclusively used test scores to document some significant language gains during study abroad (Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1993; Lindseth, 2010; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). These studies supported the long-established assumption that study abroad is an ideal context for language learning. In 1965, Carroll (1967) administered a MLA Foreign Language Proficiency Tests for Teachers and Advanced Students to 2,782 seniors from 203 institutions, majoring in French, German, Italian, Russian or Spanish, in order to understand the students' foreign language proficiency level when they are approaching their graduation from college. This prominent study discovered the compelling power of study abroad and proposed that time spent abroad was the major predictor of foreign language proficiency.

Time spent abroad is clearly one of the most potent variables we have found, and this is not surprising, for reasons that need not be belabored. Certainly our results provide a strong justification for a 'year abroad' as one of the experiences to be recommended for the language majors. Even a tour abroad, or a summer school course abroad, is useful, apparently, in improving the student's skill. (p. 137)

Admittedly, this earlier study has its significance in demonstrating an approach to investigate the linguistic gains in study abroad settings; however, a major limitation lies in its exclusive reliance on test scores (Freed, 1995b). In other words, it lacks qualitative data on experience, beliefs, perceptions and so on. Neither does it offer any insights on possible influences in the learning process.

Another large-scale statistical study was conducted by Bretch, Davidson and Ginsberg (1993). They analyzed extensive data relating to 658 American university students studying in Russia (the former Soviet Union) from Spring 1984 to Spring 1990, and discovered a list of predictors of successful language gains during study abroad, such as gender, experience of foreign language learning and grammar and reading skills. Compared with Carroll's study and other studies, Bretch and his colleagues expanded the scope to further examine how other factors may influence second language acquisition while they are in study abroad context; however, similar to Carroll's study, this one also put more weight on quantitative approach. Bretch and his colleagues realized the limitations of statistical study and thus encouraged future study "of an ethnographic kind, with the purpose of seeing what actually happens in-country in the learning process" (1993, p. 23).

Bretch and his colleagues were among many scholars that advocated to explore more nuanced relationships between language learning and study abroad contexts. In the early 1990s, focus on study abroad shifted from overall language proficiency to diverse linguistic benefits, such as overall fluency, communicative skills and cultural sensitivity (Freed, 1998; Kinginger, 2008). As Freed (1998) pointed out, there were "a series of

major multi-dimensional projects as well as an interesting collection of individual studies which focus on specific linguistic features” (p. 36). For instance, students’ oral language proficiency and vocabulary growth were assessed in several studies (i.e. Freed, 1995b; Lafford, 1995). In the mid-1990s, research on study abroad expanded to discuss the agents of study abroad--the learners themselves (Freed, 1998). For instance, even though Marriott (1995) and Siegal (1995) both conducted studies to examine students’ acquisition of politeness in the Japanese language, they landed on different focus. While Marriot conducted a quantitative analysis to examine the *overall* transformation of students’ use of politeness, Siegal’s in-depth qualitative case study was used as a knowledge base to further explore learners’ *individual* differences in language learning. This distinction was also an indicator of the shift in study abroad research from pure linguistic outcome to including learners’ characteristics in learning. These studies placed students’ learning outcomes in a broader realm to consider learners’ prior learning experiences, learners’ repertoire of communicative strategies while abroad, and students’ perceptions about how their experiences related to their language learning process.

Another research focus change observed is the extension from studying language gains in study abroad contexts to comparing language gains across several contexts. Freed (2004) and his collaborators compared 28 students’ French language acquisition of various dimensions of fluency in three major language-learning settings, at-home (AH), study abroad (SA) and intensive summer immersion (IM). They believed that their study was “the first to systematically compare certain aspects of language use by adult (i.e., college age) students who spend time in any of these major language-learning settings”

(2004, p. 277). Although each one of these learning settings was studied before, there is a lack of sufficient data to compare and contrast all three of them.

In addition, there are studies that challenge the causal connection between study abroad and positive language growth; instead, these studies scrutinize variables that may affect learners' language development in the study abroad context. For instance, Brecht and his colleagues discover that students' learning progress in the study abroad environment are connected with their proficiency on arrival, opportunities to interact with native speakers and their attitudes and readiness towards the potential learning opportunities (Brecht et. al., 1993). Other studies demonstrated discrepant results on students' attitudes towards different sub-contexts, such as home stay, in-class instruction and site visits, while they are studying abroad. Miller and Ginsberg (1995) reported that students "habitually denigrate the usefulness of spending time on these kinds of activities [trying out new words and phrases] in the classroom during their study abroad" (p. 307). They discovered that students showed much stronger desire to learn the language only through talking to native speakers outside the classroom. On the contrary, Brecht and Robinson (1995) analyzed responses from former participants in an ACTR semester abroad program during one of the five semesters between fall 1989 to summer 1991 regarding the usefulness of in-class and out-of-class learning over the study abroad duration. Although there were mixed results, researchers unveiled that many students find in-class instruction during study abroad invaluable, including opportunities for scaffolding, helping students transform in-class learning to out-of-class practice,

activating their prior knowledge, and “aiding comprehension rather than production” (p. 324).

Admittedly, the focus of research in study abroad and language learning has ranged from overall proficiency (i.e., Carroll, 1967) to language gains in particular aspects (i.e., Bretch et al., 1993; Kinginger, 2008; Lafford, 1995), from pure linguistic outcomes (i.e., Marriott, 1995) to a more comprehensive study on factors that may influence the outcomes, and from language to learners (i.e., Siegal, 1995). However, most studies look at large populations and quantitative methods are dominant in the field. The piece on how learners take initiatives for their language learning via available resources is missing. It is also problematic that many studies examine language learning in isolation from cultural learning. For instance, most of studies cited above failed to consider cultural influence on students’ linguistic gains; instead, they focused on the number of accumulated vocabulary or the quantifiable proficiency level. Nor is there much discussion on how language is learned across different sub contexts, such as in-class, out-of-class communities, host families, social media platforms and traveling. Even though Freed and co-authors (Freed et al., 2004) compared students’ language learning across three settings, immersion, study abroad and at-home, not much light was shed on the multiple sub contexts under the umbrella of study abroad. For the group of students who studied abroad, it was not investigated on how they learned differently in classroom and in social settings. More qualitative inquiries are called into attention in order to answer the question: not *how much* language is learned, but at a more complex level *how* language is learned. The current project intends to explore this particular issue of

international students reflecting on how they learn both language and cultures on their own.

2.1.3. Research on culture learning in study abroad

Cultural learning context

There is extensive research on students' cultural learning in study abroad environment, and the majority of it centers around students' intercultural sensitivity development while they are abroad. Some examples include Anderson and his colleagues' study of 23 American business students' short-term experience in Europe (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbard, 2006), and Medina-Lopez-Portillo's (2004) mixed-method study of 28 American university students' participation in both Mexico and Mexico City for various length of time. Both studies seek to examine students' intercultural sensitivity gains in both long-term and short-term programs. Other researchers take an in-depth look into students' adaptation process in a foreign country. For instance, Gu and Maley (2008) explored the way tertiary level Chinese students in the UK adapt, in varying degrees, to their new learning and living environment. This study conducted questionnaires and interviews to both Chinese students and their British teachers to identify key issues that hindered students' adaptation in British learning and study environment. Individual, pedagogical and psychological factors were identified and the discussion highlighted the mutuality of understanding and action.

Recent studies also seek to understand the consistency and discrepancy of students' pre-existing views and post-trip understanding towards other countries after the study

abroad experience. Younes and Asay (2003) adopted a qualitative case study to evaluate the impact of international study experiences on college students. Authors studied three international tours from one American university to different European countries. The findings suggest that international study tours have a powerful effect on participants through intentional and incidental learning that occurs both consciously and unconsciously. Even though it is valuable to explore American students' study abroad experience in Europe, there is already a wealth of research with this focus. It would be also interesting to learn about students' study abroad experience in a more differing culture such as China and Africa. Actually, this is one of the knowledge gaps in the current literature in study abroad. There is a dearth of attention on Asian countries or Asian students' study abroad experience.

To fill in this knowledge gap, Yang (2012) studied a three-week faculty-led and non-language-base study abroad program called *Made in China* and sought to understand if and how these American students' view of China changed. Yang adopted qualitative case study to seek answers to these issues: the participants' prior attitude and knowledge about China, how their attitudes changed during the trip and what influenced the change. This study takes on critical discourse analysis to understand participants' perceptions, and it lends support to why study abroad is a meaningful and unique setting for cultural learning. When taken away from their comfort zone, students may take on new perceptions of what they used to take for granted. Their views are exposed to possible scrutiny, challenges and questions; their identities may undergo negotiation, contradiction and evolvment. Research results support that study abroad helps to enhance students'

overall awareness of global connection and offers opportunities for reflective learning when students distance themselves from their home country and develop critical lens to review their own culture (Berg et al., 2009; Carlson et. al, 1991; Haddis, 2005; Yang, 2012).

Cultural adjustment models

As research on study abroad and cultural learning progresses, a variety of models are adopted to assess learners' intercultural sensitivity. For example, Hanvey (1976) described a model of cultural adjustment as consisting of four stages: superficial/tourism, cultural clash, intellectual analysis and cultural immersion. However, Furnham and Bochner (1986) disagreed with the negative reaction assumed in Hanvey's model. Instead, they distinguished the difference between competence and performance. In other words, Furnham and Bochner believed that sojourners may understand the cultural rules cognitively but may refuse to perform the cultural norms because of some nuanced and overlooked factors, such as shyness, personality factors and feelings of intimation with people from the target culture. Compared with Hanvey's model, the latter explanation takes into consideration the learners' inner emotional and motivational factors. This lays a foundation for future discussion to include individual differences and motivations in discussing cultural learning in study abroad settings.

Another prominent model was Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993), which posits that individuals would progress through six stages in developing their intercultural sensitivity: denial, defense, minimization,

acceptance, adaptation and integration. However, depending on the individual differences and specific context, this growth process is not necessarily linear in relationship to the six stages. The DMIS model has been frequently adopted in studying sojourners' intercultural sensitivity, such as Engle and Engle's (2004) study on American students' trip to France and Jackson's (2009) study on Hong Kong students' trip to England. The former study adopted Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to assess 187 one-semester study abroad participants' acquisition of cultural skills. Authors summarized two factors in the program design that contributed to the "clear development of cross-cultural competence": "as much direct, authentic contact with the host culture as possible, and skillful mentoring which guides, informs, inspires, and stimulates the experiential learning process" (p. 232). Jackson's (2009) study also implemented IDI to measure 14 Hong Kong students' intercultural sensitivity development prior and after their five-week sojourn in England. Her result suggested that "well-planned pre-sojourn preparation, adequate socio-emotional support during the sojourn, and post-sojourn debriefings can prompt and sustain deeper levels of language and intercultural training" (p. 14). These two studies center around a different student population and different duration of study abroad programs, but both illuminate that if the program is well-designed and students are actively engaged, students are able to achieve complex and sophisticated understandings of cultural differences, and to be more culturally sensitive and competent.

Guidelines for students in study abroad

Another large body of literature related to study abroad and cultural learning

offers practical guidance and training materials for sojourners' learning abroad experience. One of the most prominent works is the *Handbook of Intercultural Training* (Landis, Bennett & Bennett, 2004), where authors reviewed a variety of theories, research foundation and practice. These leading researchers analyzed the wide range of regions and cultural issues with depth and breadth, and suggested a broad array of activities for intercultural training and intervention. While the handbook was significantly informing, Storti took a step further to address the needs of a diverse audience through his work *The Art of Crossing Cultures* in 2007. Storti presented a more holistic picture of intercultural misunderstanding, identified distinctive country and cultural shock, and provided guidance on how to anticipate differences and master positive reactions to differences. Storti's instructional book was useful for not only expats but also people from local culture who work with expats; it also offered insights for sojourners at various stage of their life, pre-departure, during the trip and upon return from the trip.

While existing scholarship offers various models in helping us understand international students' cultural experience, the risks lie in that fitting each individual into a category may miss nuances and subtle complexity that underlie in their behaviors. Therefore, in discussing cultural learning in study abroad, more attention is called upon learners' strategies and experience. For instance, some research (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Reid, 1987) stressed that students' personal experience, perspectives, experiment and engagement are powerful influential factors in their study abroad experience. Scholars thus encouraged learners to be reflective, observant and take on an active role to make sense of study abroad experience. Similarly, Kolb (1984) places learners and their

subjective experience at the center of research and emphasizes the importance of learners themselves making sense of their own experience. I agree with Kolb on the importance of investigating learners' reflection on how they learn and their role in learning because "learning is a process whereby knowledge is *created through the transformation of experience*" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Having students reflect on their experience allows them to transform their experience from interaction with the world to internalize the knowledge. Placing students' experience as a research center can better help audience to better understand and grow empathy to their learning process.

I also argue that more in-depth inquiries should be done to understand culture learning across contexts. It means that our studies can expand from *either* academic culture *or* social culture to *both* cultures. Because international students flow between social and academic settings every day, it makes more sense to take a holistic view of cultural learning in both and even more sub-contexts. Culture should be regarded as a dynamic, ever changing, contextual, multifaceted and multidimensional. To address the complexity of cultural learning, the current project adopts the plural form: *cultures*. My aim is to explore international students' learning of multiple cultures during their study abroad period, and reject the idea that there is a single, monolithic host culture, hence my decision to refer to culture always in the plural. Connections are drawn to explain how learning different cultures inform each other and inform language learning.

2.1.4. Learner variables in study abroad

As Bacon (2002) mentioned in her study, some students attain “a pivotal moment in their academic and personal development” while others find the study abroad experience “a mismatch of expectations and outcome” (p. 637). Learners’ different reactions to and achievement in the same study abroad context might be explained by variable accounts such as “striking individual differences in learning styles, motivation and aptitude, the features of the specific language to be learned, the degree to which they are actually ‘immersed’ in the native speech community and the interaction of these variables with formal classroom instruction in the study abroad context” (Freed, 1998, p. 32). Pelligrino’s book chapter echoes Freed’s conclusion that spending time in the target language culture is not a causal factor to definite language acquisition without learners’ engagement and investment (Pelligrino, 1998). Students’ perception of how language is learned also affects their learning progress. Pelligrino (1998) offers an overview of research concerning students’ perceptions on language learning during study abroad, and stresses that some students “retain a view of the language as an academic, classroom-based topic to be mastered, leading them to choose practice opportunities concordant with that view” (p. 97). As a result, students may neglect the importance of everyday exposure to target language and cultural practice. Their endeavor to out-of-class communication may diminish and language acquisition may slow down. Such views add to the other possible challenges, such as access to resources and emotional reliance, for students to achieve positive learning outcomes during study abroad.

Other researchers have demonstrated a variety of learner-related factors that may prohibit language and culture learning in study abroad circumstance. In her review on

international students' adjustment issues, Andrade (2006) notes that students' English proficiency, academic skills and educational background primarily affect their academic achievement and sojourner experience. She resonates that students' "compensating strategies related to academic skills, motivation and effort" are as important as institutional intervention to assist international students' success in study abroad settings. A case in point is Stoyhoff's study of 77 freshmen international students' academic achievement during their first six months at a university in the United States. His results suggest a positive relationship between factors, such as motivation, strategies and test-taking skills, and academic achievement: "students who have the motivation and ability to stay up-to-date in their assignments and who are better at taking tests appear to earn better grades" (Stoyhoff, 1997, p. 63). Moreover, students' personality, self-confidence and risk-taking competence also account for their learning progress (DeKeyser, 2007; Jacob and Greggo, 2001; Lewthwaite, 1996; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000; Senyshyn et al., 2000). Determination (Bacon, 2002) also accounts for successful learning. Learners are the agents of the experience; what they believe in learning, how they behave and respond in this context are essentially related to the learning outcomes. For instance, Bacon (2002) conducted an ethnographic longitudinal study of a British college student Lily's study abroad life in Mexico for one semester. Bacon notes that Lily, as an intelligent and open-minded student who "may well meet all the qualifications for study abroad" (p. 645) still has to experience conflict in order to adjust. In this study, Lily underwent an "individual wrestling between facts and experiences, previous knowledge and personality" (p. 645). What made her learning outcomes positive is partly

due to her determination to understand the rules of Mexican culture, to scrutinize her own ignorance, and to *perform* in the culture.

One of the frequently discussed factors related to learners is learning strategy. Considering the profound influence of strategies in study abroad experience, Cohen and his coauthors (Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert & Hoff, 2005) published a series of three prominent works called *Maximizing Study Abroad through Language and Culture Strategies* for students, study abroad program professionals and language instructors. These works defined language and cultural strategies in study abroad contexts as “the conscious and semiconscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners to improve their knowledge and use of the TL [target language] on the one hand, and their understanding and functional use of all that is culture on the other”(Cohen et al., 2005, p. 17). The *Students’ Guide* discussed nine sets of cultural learning strategies, related to dealing with surroundings with different cultures, culture shock, difficult time in the new culture, making adjustment, different communication styles, understanding non-verbal communication, interacting with people of the host culture, home-stay family, and returning to the home culture. In terms of language strategies, authors listed 19 categories of strategies under six language skill areas: listening, vocabulary, speaking, reading, writing and translation. I use the definition and categorization of strategies for my study due to two major reasons: (1) these strategies are created with three phases of study abroad in mind: pre-departure phase, in-country phase and reentry phase. It reflects authors’ broader conception of study abroad; sojourners’ pre-departure and reentry experiences are, to some degree, as important as the time they actually spend abroad. (2)

These strategies underscore the importance of learners' thoughts as well as behaviors. Authors consider learning in study abroad as an entity integrating both language and culture. In 2005, the same authors conducted a mixed-method research with people and programs that implemented the books in order to evaluate the usefulness. Their final report revealed compelling benefits of educational intervention on students' language and culture learning during their study abroad, and also raised the importance of using multidimensional methods to understand students' study abroad experience.

Learning strategies are regarded as important to explain why some learners achieve higher language and culture development than others. It is believed that in order to study what and how learning happens in a specific study abroad context, it is imperative to examine the accessibility of language learning resources within that context, the students' dispositions towards them, and learners' strategies to utilize the available resources (Kinging, 2008; Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi & Lassegard, 2002). These issues were discussed in Kinginger's (2008) case study of 24 American college students' experience in France for one semester. Her study revealed two important points: (1) Globalization and technology development are like double-edged sword. On one hand, it increases accessibility to information; on the other hand, it helps students become so self-sufficient that they see less need to communicate with local people. (2) To achieve optimal results from study abroad, students need to be aware of "the role of language in shaping social reality", to have "an attitude of empathy", "sincere curiosity" and "willingness to suspend judgment in the interest of learning" (p. 4). Ginsburg and Miller (2000) also expressed the value to "dig deeper into the qualities and specific of

student experiences” and “to understand what students bring to them and how they used them for *learning*” (Ginsburg & Miller, 2000, p. 256).

One of the works on learners’ strategies in study abroad was conducted by Ife (2000) and it reported that despite the fact that students are conscious of the weakness in their performance, they are not strategic in maximizing their time in study abroad for learning. Holmes (2004) noticed in his case study that lack of or weak discussion skills were part of the reason why ethnic Chinese students could not get good grades in New Zealand colleges. Learners’ desire and maneuvers to utilize their time during abroad, ways to solve problems that emerge in study and daily life, and their communicative skills in social settings are all part of the strategies to achieve their goals in study abroad environment.

In summary, the research on study abroad has a traditional focus on language proficiency or intercultural sensitivity development documented by statistical analyses of test results. These studies were “highly product-oriented, focusing on the measurable advances students [made] in language proficiency and linguistic knowledge while abroad” (Pellegrino, 1998, p. 91); however, relatively little research probes into the participants’ *own perspectives* of their study abroad process.

Moreover, even though there are an increasing number of studies along the line of strategies and learner differences, there remains a knowledge gap to fill. I wish to know how they transform learning from interaction with the external world to internal processing. In this dissertation, I wish to explore the following questions:

1. What mediational means do international students use in study abroad settings to adjust to a new social and academic context?
2. Why do they choose to use these means?
3. How do these international students interact with the mediational means?
4. What influences international students' mediated learning in study abroad?

2. 2. Sociocultural theory

Sociocultural theory is adopted as the theoretical form of this study to seek answers for the aforementioned questions because it aligns with the central assumption that human beings learn through mediated behaviors.

2.2.1. Sociocultural perspectives

How people learn has been discussed and researched for many decades. There has been a long established belief that learning is purely a cognitive and universal process; while others believe that learning takes place within contexts and is not a universal process. In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet Belarusian psychologist Lev Vygotsky created the cultural historical theory, based on which his contemporary scholars and followers systematically developed and applied sociocultural perspectives to examine children's learning.

The fundamental concept for sociocultural theory is that human activities take place in social, cultural and historical contexts, and are mediated by language and other symbols (Vygotsky, 1978). "Vygotsky conceptualized development as the

transformation of socially shared activities into internalized process” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192). Vygotsky (1978) believes that a person is born with lower mental activities, but the higher forms of mental activities, such as reasoning, problem-solving, planning and evaluating, voluntary memory and intentional learning, are development processes that are mediated by symbolic means. While traditional behaviorism believes that humans’ movement is a natural response, Vygotsky connects movement with higher-level development and sees the function of signs in movement to achieve goals. He states,

The system of signs restructures the whole psychological process and enables the child to master her movement. It reconstructs the choice process on a totally new basis. Movement detaches itself from direct perception and comes under the control of sign functions included in the choice response. (1978, p. 35)

According to Vygotsky, using signs to mediate behavior “represents a fundamental break with the natural history of behavior” (p. 35), and it is the use of signs that distinguishes human behaviors from primitive behaviors of animals. Human beings achieve higher intellectual activities with use of signs and tools. For example, human beings read books to gain knowledge, speak languages to reason and use sounds to express emotions; these behaviors mediated with tools and signs lead to higher intellectual development within human beings.

Over the last three decades, sociocultural insights have been applied in the field of second language acquisition, intercultural development and study abroad (i.e., Gao, 2006; Jackson, 2004; Lantolf, 1994, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Swain, 2000; Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2010). According to Ortega, socioculturalism reacts “against

behaviorism and its exclusive focus on lower-level mental operations and also against mentalism and the duality of mind and environment that characterized Piaget's psychology" (Ortega, 2009, p. 218). Sociocultural theory provides a stimulating way to examine the power of social interaction on learners' language and cultural development. Mediation, often viewed as the most important concept in sociocultural theory, plays a critical role in helping researchers understand how learners utilize physical tools and semiotic signs to direct their behavior to change reality and foster development.

2.2.2. Major tenets of sociocultural theory

Vygotsky's cultural history theory sociocultural theory enlightened the academia with new perspectives to examine learning and development. Wertsch concluded three basic tenets of sociocultural perspectives (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Wertsch, 1991):

(1) Individual development has its origins in social sources.

Vygotsky believes that children's development goes through two stages, first in the social stage and then the psychological stage. Along these two stages, children progress from interpsychological category where they interact with other people to intrapsychological category where psychological functions are internalized within the children as individuals (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Take language learning for instance, Zukow-Goldring and Ferko (1994) revealed in their studies that beginning speakers' language mastery has close connection with their caregivers. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) point out that "contemporary research supports the sociocultural claim that the relationships between individuals form a basis for cognitive and linguistic mastery.

This process, whether in the classroom or elsewhere, includes transmission, construction, transaction, and transformation in continuing, complex interplay” (p. 192). Even though Vygotsky’s research centered on children’s development more than half a century ago, his theoretical enterprise has been applied to study individuals of all ages across diverse disciplines. As editors conclude, Vygotsky’s works are impactful and his legacy is to “offer through his theoretical formulations a powerful tool for restructuring human life with an aim toward survival” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 133). Vygotsky’s theoretical enterprise has extended beyond research on children to adults learning, from psychological field to education and more.

Sociocultural perspectives believe that a person’s learning process is not happening only within a person’s cognitive system. In other words, a person’s action and development are influenced and shaped by various social sources, including social position, cultural forms and interpersonal interaction. One’s social position, such as gender, race, class and other significant division, potentially influence one’s perspectives on cultural values and interpretations of different phenomena (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte Jr. & Cain, 1998). It is inappropriate to over generalize that people from the same cultural background may have the same understanding or values because people “have perspectives on their cultural worlds that are likely to differ by gender and other markers of social position” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 31).

(2) Human action is mediated by semiotic (signs and symbols, including language) system.

Vygotsky emphasizes that what distinguishes human beings from animals lies in the ability of humans to use devices to mediate their action (Vygotsky, 1978). Human beings have the ability to use tools and signs to “modify their own mental environment” and “direct their own behavior” (Holland et al., 1998). It is believed that these intrinsic capacities and processes within humans are shaping a person’s actions through “reflexive mediation of behavior, the objectifying, monitoring and evaluating stances that a person sometimes takes toward his or her own behavior” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 19). The devices are adopted firstly in interaction with others, and then gradually adopted for self-activity.

For Vygotsky, mediational devices come in various forms, including language, number system, writing, diagrams and tangible tools such as computer and paintbrush. It can be a physical tool like a map or a psychological tool like language. Physical tools are adopted to direct the individual’s behavior with the external world, and psychological tools are adopted to direct the individual’s behavior internally (Wertsch, 1991). No matter what forms the mediation means come in as, they serve to connect the external world with the internal world, the society and the individuals, the interpersonal communication and intrapersonal communication. It is common to see sociocultural process unfold in everyday life and in academic settings. One example related to everyday life is Whittaker’s (2008) interaction with a metro map during her stay in Washington D.C. The metro map, serving as a mediation means, started as a tool to direct her mobility between places, but later transformed into a sign to connect her internal world with the external world. As she stated, “it also became a sign. It changed me as I became a self-sufficient

commuter, and I changed it as I imbued it with meaning born of my own experiences, my own perspective” (p. 31). Another example is related to two Korean learners’ writing strategies mediated by computers, communities and self-speech (Kang & Pyun, 2013). Authors reveal that “a learner’s socially situated context is closely related to the kinds of writing strategies and mediating tools he or she uses or prefers” (p. 52). These studies support that sociocultural processes and individual functioning as “interacting moments in human action, rather than as static processes that exist in isolation from one another” (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 84).

(3) Genetic (developmental) analysis is adopted to study the *process* but not the *product* of development.

According to sociocultural theory, learning and development happen in social, cultural and historical contexts. As these contexts, especially the historical conditions, are constantly changing, it is not rigorous to adopt a universal lens to assess development. There can be no universal schema that can adequately represent the dynamic relationship between external and internal processes of development (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Vygotsky stressed the importance of focusing on “the very *process* by which higher forms are established” instead of the *product* of development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 64). Development is a continuous process and there is intricate interconnectedness between the social sources, cultural origins and historical influence. Children’s development is a combined result of a long process of developmental events that happen at the social level and individual level (Vygotsky, 1978). This notion holds truth to adult learning. Take language learning in study abroad settings for instance. Kinginger (2008) points out, in

the aforementioned study of the 24 American students in France, that “the development of advanced language competence requires a long-term investment of time and effort” (p. 4). In light of this fact, to attain a more accurate understanding of individual development, it is advised to study learning in a genetic or developmental analysis of process rather than a fixed and product-oriented approach.

2.2.3. Mediation as a central concept in sociocultural theory

Mediation is a central and critical concept in sociocultural perspectives. It has different definitions in differing contexts.

In the more limited context of sociocultural theories of development, it can refer to the process whereby individuals’ understanding is refracted through the experience of others (e.g., Chesnokova, 2004). In its stricter Vygotskian sense, mediation involves the use of culturally derived psychological tools, such as utterances in spoken or sign language, in transforming the relations between psychological inputs and outputs. (Fernyhough, 2008, p. 9-10)

Vygotsky posits that human beings rely on culturally constructed means to *mediate* their own behavior and learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Mediated activities distinguish human beings apart from animals. For him, humans have the ability to escape enslavement and develop voluntary control over their behavior and achieve higher mental functions, and the process is through active construction and use of symbols (Holland et al., 1998). The central, critical and distinguishing concept in sociocultural theory is that higher forms of

human mental activity are *mediated* (Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991).

Wertsch (1994) highlighted the centrality of mediation in Vygotsky's theory as follows:

[Mediation] is the key in his approach to understanding how human mental functioning is tied to cultural, institutional, and historical settings since these settings shape and provide the cultural tools that are mastered by individuals to form this functioning. (p. 204)

Mediational means are considered as *carriers* of knowledge. According to Vygotsky, human beings do not work *on* the physical world directly; instead, they work *with* the physical world and others with reliance on a wide range of tools and activities.

2.2.4. Four features of mediation

Wertsch and his collaborators (Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995) discover four features of mediation that emerge in extensive research:

(1) Mediation is an active process. In their account, mediational tools themselves are powerless in shaping actions. Only when individuals take an action to utilize these tools can the tools direct or affect action. Researchers believe that “mediation is best thought of as a *process* involving the potential of cultural tools to shape action, on the one hand, and the unique use of these tools, on the other” (p. 22). This notion means that cultural tools or artifacts do not affect actions in a static or mechanistic way. Rather it requires both the artifacts and the utilization to impact human's behavior.

(2) Mediation has transformatory capacities. Researchers conceive that new cultural tools introduced in the mediation process do not simply facilitate forms of action; instead, the psychological tools such as language transform and alter the entire structure of mental functioning.

(3) Mediation is empowering and constraining at the same time. While mediation empowers individuals to overcome some perceived problems, individuals will recognize limitations of the earlier forms of mediation in retrospect. New forms of mediation help individuals overcome some perceived problems but authors argue that after a period of time the new cultural tool will inevitably introduce new limitations of its own.

(4) Mediational means often are “incorporated into action in unanticipated ways” (p. 26). Although individuals take on mediational means for a purpose, scholars believe that in many cases, “mediational means often emerge in response to a host of forces typically unrelated to the form of mental functioning at issue” (p. 26).

The essence of mediation is captured in studies related to study abroad. For example, Gao (2006) revisited qualitative data from his earlier inquiry in order to discover any mediation effects of discourses, assessment methods, and influential agents upon learners’ language strategies among 14 Chinese students in China and Britain. One of the findings is that students use discourses as mediational tools “to mobilize their learning efforts in pursuit of their personal aspirations” (p. 64). It accentuates the active and transformatory nature of mediation because the language discourses not only help them pass standardized exams but also “serve as inspiring goals to assess their learning progress and as a means to decide appropriate strategies” (p. 64).

2.2.5. Different interpretations and development of sociocultural theory

Sociocultural approaches have been used to compare with other esteemed theories in examining development. Social constructivist theorists critique that Vygotskian framework is a transmission model of knowledge where students imitate established practices (Cobb, Wood & Yackel, 1993). Some scholars argue that this notion misinterprets and simplifies the mutuality of learning and the interconnectedness of personal and social dynamic. As stated above, sociocultural approaches perceive learning as a result of both social process and individual process in an interactive and dynamic relationship instead of a fixed and static situation. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) hold that the “conceptualization of internalization as unidirectional transmission freezes the debate, in part, by distorting sociocultural theorists’ views of the roles of both teacher and students” (p. 197).

Another ongoing debate is over the relationship between the ideas of Vygotsky and Piaget. While many researchers compare whose ideas are more valuable, Cole and Wertsch (1996) consider the standard discussion as placing “too narrow an emphasis on their ideas about the primacy of individual psychogenesis versus sociogenesis of mind” (p. 250). They argue that Piaget never deny “the co-equal role of the social world in the construction of knowledge” (p. 250), and on the other hand, there is evidence that Vygotsky emphasized in some of his works the importance of active individuals. As a result, Cole and Wertsch (1996) elaborate on the central difference between their theories as the role of cultural mediation of action through artifacts on the development of mind.

Both authors believe that Vygotskian ideas on mediation have four major implications: (1) artifacts do not simply facilitate mental process; instead, they “fundamentally shape and transform them” (p. 252). (2) Artifacts themselves are “culturally, historically and institutionally situated” which makes it impossible not to consider human action socioculturally. (3) Human actions and context are interdependent. (4) Mind extends beyond the head; in other words, higher psychological functions consist of biological individuals, cultural artifacts and social contexts. Vygotsky stresses the central role of artifacts to explain what and where mind is; and comparatively, this piece is missing in Piaget’s ideas. Though Vygotsky and Piaget focus on different set of issues, Cole and Wertsch consider their ideas as different rather than in conflict.

Moreover, Vygotsky is constantly studied and compared with his contemporary Bakhtin in relation to their understanding of learning and development. For instance, Matusov (2011) offered a comparative analysis of Vygotsky’s and Bakhtin’s approaches to consciousness, and concluded that these two theorists, instead of promoting the same ideas, proposed very different conceptions. Matusov considers Vygotsky’s approaches as “diachronical”, “monologic” and “universalist”, while Bakhtin’s approaches as “synchronic”, “dialogic” and “discourse-based”. According to Matusov, in Vygotsky’s model, the role of social is internalized as a person grows and others’ presence becomes unnecessary; on the contrary, Bakhtin sees the presence of others throughout a person’s whole life as others always exist in a person’s consciousness. As a result, Matusov concluded, “Vygotsky’s and Bakhtin’s conceptualizations are not only different but also irreconcilable” (Matusov, 2011, p. 100).

On the contrary, there is scholarship that argues that Vygotsky and Bakhtin have shared beliefs and should be considered as part of a common research line. Cornejo (2012) believes that Vygotsky and Bakhtin differ not in the way suggested by Matusov, but “in how much freedom they admit the person has” (p. 118). Vygotsky and Bakhtin both consider language as material, public and determine human subjectivity. However, the former sees language as a tool for expressiveness, which is adopted by human beings to express meanings but sometimes there is inexpressible. “Conversely, in Bakhtin the inexpressible cannot exist since every idea is a voice-idea” (Cornejo, 2012, p. 118). In other words, Cornejo sees the divergence existing in Bakhtin’s emphasis on voice in a person’s thinking and speaking. Despite the differences, Cornejo argues that Vygotsky and Bakhtin’s shared belief in social constitution of the mind makes it appropriate to consider them two as in the same research program. Moreover, Fernyhough (2008) also argues that Vygotsky’s sociocultural approaches concern the dialogic nature of higher forms of cognition but in an implicit way. For Fernyhough, Bakhtin’s explicit and prominent theorization of voice and dialogue does not differ, but extends Vygotsky’s theory, as he states, “an assimilation of the Bakhtinian concepts of voice and dialogue can provide a powerful extension of Vygotsky’s theory” (Fernyhough, 2008, p. 15).

These theoretical debates lend me on two essential questions: (1) What *is* knowledge? Vygotskian theories provide answers to this ontological question—social and cultural roots. Knowledge is socially and culturally constructed, and learning is a social act mediated through cultural artifacts. This is informing for my current study because I believe that study abroad setting is pregnant with knowledge constructed by

diverse cultures. International students learn knowledge through cultural artifacts and their own cultures are creating new knowledge at the same time. (2) *How* do individuals learn? Dialectics, self-reflection, language are essential to answer this epistemological question. Vygotskian theories are useful for study abroad research, this study in particular, because they recognize the one-ness of sojourners and the power of interpersonal speech and intrapersonal speech in this particular setting. In study abroad context, individuals' social connectedness with local nationals may vary. Both their dialogues with local communities and private languaging within self-reflection are valuable tools to detect how learning occurs. Vygotskian ideas provide both ontological and epistemological foundation for my study.

Inspired by Vygotsky's sociocultural perspectives, increasing number of researchers examine sociocultural implications and expand the interpretation of sociocultural perspectives. Wertsch is one of the prominent contributors. He states, "A sociocultural approach to mind begins with the assumption that action is mediated and that it cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 18). Wertsch (1991) posits that mind is socially distributed and connected to the notion of mediation. Similar to Vygotskian and Bakhtinian perspectives, Wertsch underscores that a person's mind is produced in sociocultural moments through their acting with a variety of mediational means. It is stressed in Wertsch's perspectives that the interconnectedness of sociocultural elements is so strong that to isolate how mind works from sociocultural environment will lead to misunderstanding of it.

2.2.6. Summary

Sociocultural theory is an important lens to understand learning in study abroad settings because it gives primary importance to learning as a mediated action through cultural artifacts in social, cultural, historical settings. Cognition, consciousness, mediation and artifacts are all socially and culturally constituted. Mediation is a social, dynamic, multifaceted, fluid and complex process. Mediational tools and signs are culturally shaped artifacts that help individuals transform the reality and in the meantime change themselves.

Sociocultural approaches resonate with my assumptions that: (1) learning takes place through interaction and is influenced by individual's social, cultural and historical background; and (2) Study abroad context consists of various forms of resources for learners to interact with and mediate learning. This theoretical framework also fits in my purpose of the study to examine the learning *process* but not the *product*. I am inspired to discover what resources offer affordances and constraints in participants' language and cultural learning experience. I am equally interested in investigating how the participants make sense of these mediational means and in revealing variables that influence their mediated learning. This project builds on current studies to expand inquiries on the interconnectedness between other-regulation and self-regulation that take place in international students' language and cultural learning in study abroad.

Chapter 3. Methodology and Research Design

The first part of this chapter explains the methodological approach used in this dissertation. Specifically, I discuss why I chose to use case study and how a case study approach is essential for developing an in-depth understanding of international students' undergraduate experience. I will exemplify the value of case study with books and empirical studies that have adopted this research approach. A wide variety of case studies on sojourners' intercultural experience, including international marriages, immigration and study abroad--these actual examples show how case study can be used in different settings to discover multiple layers of a phenomenon through thick description. I will also address the limitations of case study and discuss what could be done to ensure credibility and rigor. In the second part, I will describe the research design of this study, including the selection of the participants, methods for data collection and data analysis and will end with my positionality as a researcher.

3.1. Case study methodology

Case study is widely adopted in education research, but there is no one fixed definition of case study (Bassey, 1999). For example, Cohen and Manion (1989) define case study as a process where the researcher “typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit—a child, a clique, a class, a school or a community” (pp. 124-125).

Creswell (1994) echoes that case study is a single instance of a bounded system, such as a child, a class, a school, a community or other similarly bounded units. While these two definitions focus on the boundary and the individual unit, other scholars define case study

with a slightly different emphasis on the importance of contexts. Yin (2013) holds that “a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 2). Yin further explains that case study relies on multiple sources of evidence and requires triangulated analysis to support the argument. In other words, Yin holds that it is the specific context, but not the boundary of the group, that helps us understand a problem. Stake, another important case study methodologist, also underscores the importance of examining contexts in conducting case study research but he sees case study within the interpretive paradigm (Bassey, 1999). In Stake’s (1995) definition, case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case within important circumstances. Despite the variations in definitions, case study is valued for its focus on understanding contexts, rich description and its usefulness in probing into the complexity of a problem.

Case study mirrors qualitative research that investigates social human problems in a natural setting and presents a whole and complex representation of the phenomenon with plentiful description and explanation (Andrade, 2009; Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morgan & Smircich, 1980), yet case study has a distinctive research focus on *cases* rather than populations or samples (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). To restructure and represent details of *cases* to the readers, case study allows researchers to employ various methods such as interviews, observation, field studies, artifacts and so forth (Gall et al., 2003; Patton, 2001). Case study is seen as one of several approaches to

qualitative inquiry and shares many of the characteristics of qualitative research but in the meanwhile is embraced due to its unique advantages.

While case study was originally misunderstood as a method of collecting anecdotes with “a total absence of control as to be of almost no scientific value” (Campbell & Stanley, 1966, p. 6), there is increasing acknowledgement and support on its value in social science research. Flyvbjerg (2006) reviewed a large body of literature and empirical studies to correct five misunderstandings about case study, regarding its validity, biased narratives and generalizability. He also exemplified the role of case study and its importance in research, teaching and learning across disciplines. He landed on the conclusion that “case study is a necessary and sufficient method for certain important research tasks in the social sciences, and it is a method that holds up well when compared to other methods in the gamut of social science research methodology” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 26).

The use of case study in the field of international education and communication is expanding (i.e., Foote, 2009; Fry & Kempner, 1996; Karko, 2000; Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999). Some researchers explore a particular aspect of study abroad experience, such as the study to examine Japanese students’ contact with English outside classroom during study abroad (Tanaka, 2007), whereas others aim to identify a broader trend or pattern in study abroad experience, such as the investigation on factors that influence international students’ academic performance in a project management course (Lebcir, Wells & Bond, 2008). No matter which dimension the research lands on, case study gives researchers a range of options to approach the issue.

Such studies may appear as in various forms, single-case or embedded single-case (Yin, 2013), but the depth of details and richness of knowledge uncovered is compelling evidence to account for the unique merits of this approach. For instance, Greenholtz and Kim (2009) completed a single-case study with participant Lena to examine her IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory) as an Adult Third Country Kid. They chose Lena as the only case because she has multiple and complex experiences as a cultural hybrid: she was born in Hong Kong with Korean parents, but spent significant chunks of her childhood and adolescence in Europe and America. Both researchers took an in-depth look into Lena's previous experiences in various places and attained an in-depth understanding of her multifaceted identity. This single case study demonstrates the advantage in its ability to probe into the case from various dimensions, which can lead to richer knowledge of the particular student's experience.

For another example, Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) conducted a case study of four international students' adapting process in the discipline-specific way of writing in the U.S. classroom. These four students include one Indonesian woman, one Taiwanese man, one Russian woman and one Russian man. Using an embedded single case study allows the flexibility to study several students with distinctive backgrounds and experiences, and in the meanwhile still ensures that the four participants remain linked to or embedded within the same context. Similarly, another fascinating example is Pomfret's (2007) book *Chinese lessons: Five classmates and the story of new China* where he embedded the story of himself as an international student and four Chinese classmates' stories within one context to document the change of China over forty years.

This book compares the author's own experience with other native Chinese experience, which effectively presents to readers the similarities and drastic differences in life style, attitudes and intercultural communication.

For the rest of this section, I will highlight three unique features of case study and explain how I apply these features in this current project to address the complex nature of international students' mediated learning experience. These three features include: (1) unit of analysis, (2) thick description and (3) ability to answer *why* and *how* questions. Literature and empirical studies will be cited to explicate the meaning of each feature, and details will be offered on how these features are achieved in my study.

3.1.1. Unit of analysis

The essence of case study is *case* itself. "Cases are units of analysis" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 447). A unit of analysis can be individuals, groups, neighborhood, programs, organizations, cultures, regions or nation-states. It can also be critical incidents, stages in the life of a person or program, or anything that can be defined as a specific, unique, bounded system (Cohen et al., 2011; Stake, 1995). Robson (2002) concurs that case study can analyze an individual case study, a set of individual case studies, a social group study, studies of organization and institutions, studies of events, roles and relationships. Whether it is a single case study, embedded single case study or multiple case studies, unit of analysis is what the researchers analyze or define a case. Unit of analysis sets the context within which researchers discover and discuss in-depth details.

Many empirical studies utilize case study with dissimilar units of analysis depending on the research purpose. A type of unit of analysis includes individual students in a particular context at a point in time (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). One example is Benacerraf's (1998) autobiography *From Caracas to Stockholm: A life in medical science*. In this book, he analyzes himself as a unit of analysis and recalls his development in different points of time and under different circumstances. Similarly, individual's study abroad journey can be seen as connected dots of one's experience in various stages, depending on the length of their stay and people they meet; using individuals as units of analysis will allow us the opportunity to understand their experience at different phases.

Another type of unit of analysis is the characteristics of a group. A case in point is Yang's (2012) case study on a short-term study abroad program in China. She identifies the group as unit of analysis because these participants share similar background based in the U.S. and travel to China for the same purpose. This study seeks to discover the participants' attitude change towards China after the trip. Using a group as unit of analysis can lead us to reveal possible patterns and repeated themes shared among many participants. Unit of analysis can also be organizational or institutional arrangement (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). For researchers who want to study the connection of study abroad programming and international students' experience, this may be invaluable. Burn (1991) addressed the issue of increasing concern of the relationship between study abroad and home campus curriculum by analyzing activities undertaken by eight colleges and universities. Using programs as units of analysis can help authors identify some

commonly shared issues. Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) studied the link between program duration and the development of intercultural sensitivity, by analyzing participants from the same university joining two different language-based programs of differing lengths: a seven-week summer program in Taxco, Mexico and a 16-week semester program in Mexico City. As we can see through these examples, unit of analysis is a unique characteristic and it enlightens researchers how to address the study abroad experience issue from different angles to yield desired results.

The current study is an embedded single-case study. The design approaches each student as a unit of analysis and strives to elicit rich information from each unit. It is important to stress that although case study is a process of investigating a phenomenon or an instance within a context, it does not mean that the number of cases under study is limited to one. MacDonald and Walker consider $n=1$ as a misleading concept (1975). Patton (2001) also clarifies that a single case study is not a strict term to refer to only one person or one group of people. It “is likely to be made up of many smaller cases—the stories of specific individuals, families, organizations units, and other groups” (p. 297). In light of current study, the purpose is to examine undergraduate students’ language and culture learning phenomenon, but there are ten cases, or units, in this study. These ten international students from Mainland China consist of ten embedded cases from this single case study.

The context under this research is these participants’ social and academic environment in the United States. Case study benefits this particular research focus because it generates *context-dependent knowledge* (Flyvbjerg, 2006) to understand the

participants' development process. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), people develop from beginners to expert with the assistance of *context-dependent knowledge* because people "operate on the basis of intimate knowledge of several thousand concrete cases in their areas of expertise" (p. 5). This notion emphasizes that knowledge from contexts is helpful for researchers and audience to become expert in understanding the participants in this study; but for this inquiry, it offers an alternative angle for me to scrutinize the participants' learning experience—as each participant in my study accumulates knowledge in his/her particular context, how does context knowledge support his/her development as a learner? How does the study abroad context mediate their learning development? For instance, one of the participants, Dani, has study experience in both research sites in this study, and she explained how understanding different contexts has informed her to adopt different mediational means to foster learning. From a beginner who struggled to understand the textbook to an expert hired to tutor other local students, her academic success is largely due to her contextual knowledge, experience and mediation with contextual means. Similarly, another participant, Ben, studied in various cities in the U.S., and his grappling with family contexts, in-class and social communities has nurtured his growth as a learner and communicator. Case study allows me to generate context-dependent knowledge and data to better interpret participants' holistic experience-academic and personal.

My research focus is to explore what resources are available for learning and how they use these materials within this context. Unit of analysis informs me to connect each person's in-class and out-of-class learning episodes, just like putting puzzle pieces

together, to unfold a more comprehensive picture of each unit, or each case. With a complete and detailed picture of each unit, I can then make comparisons and contrast to identify shared themes and dissimilarities from the cases.

3.1.2. Thick description of case study

One of the most important and unique advantages of case study is the *thick description* (Marriam, 1998) that this research approach is able to provide through multiple methods. Case study's distinctive advantage and characteristic is its ability to produce thick description of the case in natural and real life settings to enhance understanding of phenomenon.

Thick description can bring a case to life in a way that is not possible using the statistical methods of quantitative research. Thus readers of case study reports may have a better basis for developing theories, designing educational interventions, or taking some other action than they would have from reading quantitative research report. Also thick description helps readers to compare cases with their own situations. (Gall et al., 2003, P. 470)

A thick description means that the case study provides good depiction of the phenomenon and recreates the situation within the real context. To achieve thick description, case study data can be in various forms such as words, images, physical objects, documentary data and statistics (Gall et al., 2003; Patton, 2001; Robson, 2002). As Yin notions, “the case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—

documents, artifacts, interviews, and observation---beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study” (p. 12).

This is particularly useful in addressing to the phenomenon of international students’ experience because a complete and detailed depiction can reconstruct the real life situation to the audience and helps to contextualize the discussion. Wilkinson (2000, p.36) supports using case study for research in study abroad by saying “underlying complexity of the overseas experience, which is not easily tapped in studies involving large sample sizes, is explored in a growing number of case studies that examine a foreign sojourn from the perspective of the participants”. Her statement is stressing the abstractness and intricacy of a person’s experience, especially in a cross-cultural context. Understanding international students’ experience is an incredibly complicated topic, as it is intersected with emotion, adaptation, communication and interaction with other people, and it may be impacted by their social life, academic life, country views, cultural values and so forth; it is not easy to elicit in-depth information through statistic data. Case study as a detailed and focused approach will be very suitable to “probe deeply and to analyze intensively the multifarious phenomena that contribute to the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalizations about the wider population to which the unit belongs” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 296).

For the current study, I also employed multiple types of data to provide collection evidence and to make the case more convincing in a real-life context. Individual interviews, focus group meetings, in-class and out-of class observations, social media post along with numerous documents. Interviewing empowers participants to give

detailed narratives. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, “Case studies often contain a substantial element of narrative. Good narratives typically approach the complexities and contradictions of real life” (p. 21). Participants’ detailed narratives unfold vivid examples that other approaches cannot have elicited. For instance, one participant Ben expressed his endeavors to strike a balance between his profound American influence and the Chinese core identity. His narratives are supplemented with observations on his engagement in academic setting and social setting. Shan shared many stories, both funny and frustrating ones, to unfold her journey of building confidence as an international student. Yang repeatedly emphasized her introvert personality and questioned her intercultural competence. These narratives and stories are not quantifiable, but they are invaluable to depict the individuals and their experience in their particular contexts. The dense and depth are the beauty of case study. It is this beauty that relates readers with the dynamic and real experience of the participants, which is hard to achieve. Peattie (2001) considers “the contextual and interpenetrating nature of forces” as the very value of case study (p. 260).

Another tool in case study approach that fits into this particular research is observation. According to Bailey (1994), “observation is decidedly superior to survey research, experimentation, or document study for collecting data on nonverbal behavior” (p. 243). Moreover, different from observation in other qualitative approaches, the essence of observation in case study lies in the *particularity* of context. Merriam (2009) considers case studies as particularistic because of its focus on “a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (p. 43). In my observation protocol, I focused on the

particular situation of mediated learning; in other words, I paid my full attention on the interaction between the participants and mediational means. A case in point is my observation of Yang's interaction with visitors and materials during her work shift at a cultural event. The spotlight was shed on her verbal and non-verbal communication with people and resources in this particular context for the particular learning purpose.

During the observation and conversations with the participants, I developed a more informal relationship with the participants, which led to more access to the participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings (Cohen et al., 2011; Geertz, 1973). By using observation and interview, I have collected both organic data directly from the participants' narratives and observational notes of their behaviors in natural contexts, in order to develop a holistic view of the situation (Dyer, 1995).

I find similar application of case study in other publications concerning study abroad and intercultural communication. Spenader (2005) adopted multiple tools to study the role of cross-cultural adaptation in language and cultural learning through a beautiful case study of four high school students' exchange experience in Sweden for a year, Elsa, Faith, Jenny and Max. The unit of analysis in the study was individuals within the particular study abroad program. Quantitative tools were adopted to measure students' actual linguistic gains, but in order to present richer details, she also used in-depth interviews and monthly email questionnaires. She saw case study as a way to "allow for each student's story to be told in rich detail, paying attention to the individual experience" (p.48) and it "allows research to focus on human development as a *process*,

while paying careful attention to how an individual reacts to and behaves within a particular situational context or social interaction” (p. 48).

Bacon (2002) studied one female student’s language development and cultural adjustment during her study in Mexico, and her study suggests that encouraging students to talk about their experience can facilitate their cultural adjustment and language gains. Some people may argue that only one case is too weak to make a general suggestion, but Bacon’s study has utilized multiple sources of data, including speech and writing samples, class and field trip observations, focus group meetings, exams, class evaluations and interviews, to lay a solid ground work so that the audience can see emergence of trends. Her thorough description of the context connects the readers with the situation and strengthens the final conclusion.

Jackson (2004) also conducted a case study on sojourners’ intercultural learning by studying a group of students from Hong Kong who went to England for a fourteen-week study abroad program. Her data included interviews, an intercultural reflections journal, surveys, field notes, ethnographic conversations and a diary. The study is set in a bounded context and the purpose is to “gain a deeper understanding of their intercultural learning over time and space” (p. 2); case study emerges as a most suitable approach because case study observations take place over an extended period of time to allow researchers to develop more intimate and informal relationship with participants in a more natural environment (Bailey, 1994). When researcher and the participants establish a comfortable and trusting rapport, the participants may act more naturally in the study and observation data will be more faithful to the real life (Bailey, 1994).

3.1.3. Case study to answer *how* and *why* questions

Case study research has strength in answering *how* and *why* questions in examining a problem and allow alternative interpretations from the audience.

Case studies can establish cause and effect ('how' and 'why'); indeed one of their strengths is that they observe effects in real contexts, recognizing that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects, and that in-depth understanding is required to do justice to the case. (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 289)

Yin (2013) uses evaluating public programs as an example to explain that quantitative researchers are limited in answering how or why a given treatment or intervention necessarily worked (or not) but case study approach demonstrated its own advantage in this capturing rich information to answer these questions (p. 22). Yin also provides guidance for researchers to decide if case study is the appropriate choice of method.

The more that your questions seek to explain some present circumstance (e.g. 'how' or 'why' some social phenomenon works). The more that case study research will be relevant. The method also is relevant that more that your questions require an extensive and "in-depth" description of some social phenomenon. (p. 4)

In understanding international students' experience, research questions often center around how the experience is, why some experience is positive and why some is negative, or how can students benefit best from study abroad experience, and so forth. It fits very well with the unique feature of case study approach. A powerful example is Ripley's (2013) new book *The smartest kids in the world: And how they got that way*.

This book is a set of case studies to explore and compare three American high school students' exchange experience in Finland, Poland and South Korea. Case study approach demonstrates its invaluable advantages in this book: one contribution is to use a great deal of dialogues, description of behaviors and feelings to tell the stories; the other contribution is using students' own perspectives and experience to answer some complex *how* and *why* questions, such as Why do American teenagers rank lower than other countries? Or how do students in other countries do in some soft skills other than standardized tests?

My dissertation study regards *how* and *why* as the central theme of research; in particular, I seek answers to *how* these participants use tools and semiotic signs to mediate learning, *how* learning occurs, and *why* they learn in this way. The following strategies were reflected in my study in this regard:

(1) Relate participants' cultural background and past experience to achieve empathetic understanding of why things happen in a certain way. One precious merit in case study is its ability to acquire cultural *verstehen*, "(that is, empathy: understanding the meaning of actions and interactions from the members' own points of view)" (Eckstein, 2000, p. 121). Stake (1995) also says that studying particular cases can provide *verstehen*/understanding of human experience.

When I interviewed the participants for the first time, I asked some general questions related to their background. While analyzing the scripts from first interview, I identified each student's unique background and thus designed more customized questions to elicit richer information on those particular questions. Their experience not

only reminds me of my own personal experience as an international student, but more importantly, helps me better understand their decisions and behaviors to achieve learning. For instance, Ben's emotional narratives on his uncle's unpleasant experience as an immigrant and bias comments against his own Chinese fellows helped me understand why Ben preferred to develop a *professional* identity in the United States. As I elicited more information about him and his background, I discovered the disconnection between the strong multicultural influence in his life and his true core identity as a Chinese. He saw study abroad as a setting to achieve academic and professional success; therefore, his mediated learning consequently occurred through his engagement with professional personnel. Besides his professional world and academic world, he still desired to interact with Chinese friends. Case study approach, unlike statistical approach, led to more profound understanding (*verstehen*) and insights into key research problems or phenomena for the current study.

(2) I endeavored to provide chain of evidence to enhance the rigor of this study. Chain of evidence refers to the clear and meaningful links between research questions, data and findings (Yin, 2013). If a case study can show a clear connection between these three parts, the readers can "follow the derivation of case study evidence from the initial research questions and its use in the researchers' interpretations" (Gall et al., 2003, p. 461). Clear chain of evidence assists both researchers and audience to discover answers to how an issue occurs and why a phenomenon happens in a certain way.

One example is Kinginger's (2008) large-scale study on American students' language learning in France. Guided by case study, she provided a clear thread through

her rationale of doing the study, research questions and presentation of data from multiple sources. Case study assisted her to achieve two goals in this illuminating study: to elicit meaningful qualitative data to better understand international students' experience due to individual differences; to understand *why* some students succeeded in language learning during abroad while others did not. Using six detailed case histories allowed her to illustrate broad diversity in student experience abroad while also delving into a number of general themes relevant for other participants in the group.

Likewise, this study intends to present a clear, close and logical connection between the inquiry questions, data and findings. I reviewed existing literature to identify knowledge gap and thus raise my questions, and I also explained the significance of this inquiry. In order to seek answers to *how* and *why* questions, I utilized several sources of data in hope to present thick description and a full picture to the audience. In discussing the findings, I constantly returned to the research questions and cited original data, including interview transcript, photos, social media messaging and so on, to help audience understand these real people in real contexts.

(3) Furthermore, I pay careful attention to illustrate both the participants' perspectives and my views for readers to make their own interpretation. "It is important in case studies for events and situations to be allowed to speak for themselves, rather than to be largely interpreted, evaluated or judged by the researcher" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 290). This statement stresses the purpose of case studies to present the most natural and authentic data while allowing researchers to weave in their experience and interpretation, so as to allow readers to make their own judgment.

As a study abroad returnee myself, I have grown my own perspectives and learning strategies that make great sense to me. Yet as a case study researcher, I continuously remind myself of my positionality. For instance, maximizing opportunities to communicate with local people served me well and is highly valued by me. However, not all participants in this study found it useful; it is arguably problematic because it neglects some emotional anxiety that international students may encounter (Barron, 2006). When participants in my study disagreed with my view, my responsibility as a case study researcher is to present their view, to stand in their shoes to view the same issue, and to present their viewpoint within the specific context to the audience.

For instance, I was surprised and confused by the fact that Yang, one of the participants, was not interested in learning about cultures during her study abroad. For me, cultural learning and language learning are inseparable and should be the core purpose of study abroad experience. However, I revisited Yang's data and gained further understanding of her as a profound thinker. As a political science major in China, Yang had a critical yet harsh professor who challenged the students to critique many sensitive and crucial social issues, such as Tian An Men event and social justice. Yang was trained to think hard and to analyze individuals to the core. Therefore, in her opinion, culture exists in individuals and therefore her interest lies in knowing individual Americans but not the culture in a broader sense. Substantial knowledge extended my understanding of Yang's view and an offered an alternative way to interpret the meaning of cultures.

Gall and her associates underscore the importance of presenting both the participants and the researchers' viewpoints in case studies. They believe that case study

researcher's task is to "figure out how to view the phenomenon as the participants view it", also called the emic perspective (Gall et al., 2003, p. 438). In the meanwhile, researchers "maintain their own perspective as investigators of the phenomenon", also known as the etic perspective (Gall et al., 2003, p. 438). By eliciting large amount of information from the participants' narratives and from observing their behavior in natural setting, I aim to understand the individuals within a specific yet complex context, to view the phenomenon as they view it. With the advantage to speak the same languages (Mandarin, Cantonese and English), I overcame the language barrier to communicate with the participants. They were encouraged to use any language to express their thoughts because I believe that speaking in a language you feel comfortable with can help express more genuine ideas and feelings. By presenting the participants' viewpoints, case study develops an understanding of a complex phenomenon as experienced by its participants; by sharing their own interpretations, researchers can present their outsiders' viewpoint, to "make conceptual and theoretical sense of the case" (Gall et al., 2003, p. 438).

Chang (2009), in her book *Factory girls: From village to city in a changing China*, did the same thing by presenting her own view and her participants' views to encourage readers' own interpretation. This book illustrated detailed stories of two young women trying to rise from the assembly lines in poor-conditioned factories in southern China. Chang followed these two girls' life for three years and documented their growth and their perspectives to the changing society. This book fascinates readers in its thick descriptions of these young women's life in all aspects; in the meanwhile, Chang related her own history as a Chinese American to these two young women. The two

women's authentic perspectives were interwoven with Chang's viewpoints, leaving readers many thought-provoking questions. Despite the fact that this book is not about international students' life, it is an exceptional example of using case study to elicit knowledge and understanding with depth.

In doing research on international students' experience, case study is suitable in use to illustrate participants' own perspectives because they are the ones who are experiencing the cross-cultural setting; in the meanwhile, researchers as outsiders can make sense of the ongoing behavior with their own experience and observation. In the end, readers can determine whether they share the same perspective on the phenomenon as the researchers do. This is the beauty of case studies: "The best case studies are capable of offering some support to alternative interpretations" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 292).

3.1.4. Limitations of case study

A common critique on case study is its generalizability and applicability. Since case study focuses on incidents and cases rather than sample and population, some may argue that a single case does not make a rule. Many scholars have responded to this critique calling it a misunderstanding or a misguided notion (Flyvbjerg, 2006). To begin with, Byrne (2009) notes,

generalizing is not the same as universalizing. It is important to be able to develop an understanding of causation that goes beyond the unique instance—the object of ideographic inquiry. However, it is just as important to be able to specify the

limits of that generalization. We cannot establish universal laws in the social sciences. (p. 1)

Byrne not only distinguishes generalizing from universalizing, but also reminds researchers and readers that the disciplinary nature of social sciences makes it difficult to establish universal laws.

Furthermore, other researchers defend that whether a single case can generalize or not depends on the case and how it is chosen (Ragin & Becker, 1992). They argue that generalizability of case studies can be increased by the strategic selection of cases. For instance, if “the objective is to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given problem or phenomenon...atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229).

Yin (2013) also argues that case studies also have generalizability as they have the ability to contribute to the expansion and generalization of theory to help researchers and readers better understand other similar cases or phenomena. In my understanding, Yin’s generalizability is an echo of what Flyvbjerg (2006) once said,

One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas ‘the force of example’ is underestimated. (p. 12)

Other scholars also resonate that case studies provide logical rather than statistical connection between cases and theories (Bassegy, 1999; Cohen, et al., 2011; Gall, et al.,

2003). Wilson (1979) indicates that it is the readers' responsibility to determine the applicability of the case findings in their own situations. As discussed in the last section, case study presents thick description of a complex situation, the participants' viewpoints and the researchers' sense-making process. It allows readers to relate their own experience to the cases, as Stake (2000) would call naturalistic generalization: "(w)hen the researcher's narrative provides opportunity for vicarious experience, readers extend their memories for happenings" (p. 442). In this way, case study contributes to the generalization and applications.

In short, case study allows readers to contextualize a situation or problem through multiple sources, to understand real people in real situations, and thus understand how ideas and abstract principles can fit together. Because of its focus on complex contextual information, case study does not seek frequencies but significance (Cohan, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Incidents rather than sample are essential in this approach as significant incidents offer researchers and readers some insights into the real dynamics of the situation and people. Additionally, the richness of contextual description in case study permits researchers to find answers to *how* and *why* questions (Benbasat, Goldstein & Mead, 1987; Yin, 2013), offering an opportunity for researchers to build not only profound knowledge of a complex situation but also a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. For the aforementioned reasons, case study is selected for this project, and next I will present the research design of this study.

3.2. Research Design

3.2.1. Sites

This study is placed in two reputable higher educational institutions in the Midwest region of the United States of America. One is the University of Minnesota and the other is Anderson College (pseudonym).

University of Minnesota is a public research-oriented institution and one of the largest schools in the nation. This university was selected for its efforts in internationalizing education, particularly their close tie with China and Chinese students:

(1) University of Minnesota has a large number of international students.

According to the 2012 annual report from the office serving international students and scholars, 5537 international students were enrolled to its main campus by fall 2012 accounting for 10.68% of the total enrollment, including 2449 undergraduates, 2439 graduate students, 221 professional students and 428 non-degree seekers.

(2) University of Minnesota offers a variety of programs for international students' study abroad experience. In other words, international students have access to various programs and events that promote intercultural understanding and diversity.

(3) This university has 100 years of collaborative relationship with China and has signed more than 80 memorandums of agreements with over 30 Chinese universities as strategic partners. The university president recently led a delegation of university's world-renowned researchers to visit China and pursuit further collaboration to solve some global pressing issues across disciplines.

Anderson College is a small private teaching-oriented institute and it is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Compared with the large population of international students in University of Minnesota, Anderson College reports that in 2012, only 74 students were international students, making up 2% of the total enrollment. This site was selected because one of the participants had finished her intensive English training in University of Minnesota and was advancing her undergraduate study in this college. She experienced the dynamic in both the large and small institutes, and provides informing insights on how campus environment influences her study abroad experience. More information about the participants will be described in the next section.

3.2.2. Participants

I recruited 10 international students from Mainland China who are pursuing undergraduate study in these two universities, including degree and non-degree levels. They share a similar broader Chinese background but join the study with distinctive prior experience in light of family environment, academic performance, language proficiency, personality and future goals (see Figure 4).

Mainland China was chosen as the place of origin because of several reasons:

(1) As a native Chinese person myself, it is my intention to seek a deeper understanding of how other Chinese fellows experience their sojourner life. I can relate to them due to our shared cultural, historical and social background and language.

(2) As mentioned in Chapter 1, Mainland China is the leading place of origin in sending students to study in the United States (IIE, 2013). Additionally, it is also the top location that sends the largest number of students to study at various levels in University of Minnesota, including undergraduate, postgraduate, professional and non-degree seeking.

(3) Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are excluded in this study because in many published figures, including the Open Doors statistics and the annual report from the University of Minnesota, these regions are considered separate from China. Even though technically Hong Kong and Macau are part of China, these two regions have had drastically different educational, political and social systems when they were colonies under Britain and Portugal respectively. Whether Taiwan is part of China is a long existing political controversy, and they appear as separate regions of origin in most reports; therefore, students from Taiwan were not considered as potential participants in this study.

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2001, p. 230) was adopted in recruiting the participants because it can yield “insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (Patton, 2001, p. 230). Purposeful sampling is also called *purposeful selection* (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88) and *criterion-based selection* (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 69). It is “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Patton notes, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth” (Patton, 2001, p.

230). Qualitative researchers have suggested a list of approaches to achieve purposeful selection and several of them are utilized in this study, including *heterogeneity sampling*, *homogeneous sampling* and *snowball sampling* (Patton, 2001). Each of these approaches was used in various stage of the process and will be explained below.

3.2.2.1. Participant recruitment

The participant recruitment process underwent three stages: (1) contacting ELP center, (2) open call and class recruitment, and (3) personal network.

(1) *Contacting ELP center* Because language learning was an important part under investigation in this paper, I purposefully started with organizations that would offer English training in University of Minnesota in order to recruit participants. In mid-January 2014, I requested a meeting with the director of English Learning Program (ELP, a pseudonym) in University of Minnesota to extend my research interest and requested support from this center. ELP was a central office in University of Minnesota that offers a wide range of credit and non-credit courses in English as a Second Language (ESL), to help non-native English speakers to succeed in their study in University of Minnesota and other work places. ELP is selected because Chinese students are the second largest group of learners in this program, after students from Arabic countries. The director expressed his generous support and offered to connect me with classroom instructors once my IRB (Institutional Review Board) was approved. At the same meeting, I expressed an interest in volunteering in one of the ESL classes in order to interact with more international

students for inspiration. A week after the meeting, I was arranged to volunteer in an Academic Learning Skills class for one hour per week.

(2) *Open call and class recruitment* In early February, I received IRB approval and contacted the ELP director again for support in recruiting participants. After the director sent out a group notice to inform 10 ELP instructors of my request, I sent out a follow-up email to each instructor highlighting my study and requested to either visit a class or have them send out my recruitment email (Appendix A). Two instructors replied with preference to circulate my recruitment email among their students and only one instructor invited me to talk about my research in two of her classes, including the academic study skills class where I volunteered and a comparative education class. In the Academic Study Skills class, I introduced the project at the end of the class and three participants agreed to join the study: Wen, Cheng and Ju (all participants' names are pseudonyms). However, no students in the Comparative Education class showed interest in participating in the study.

After talking with the three participants briefly, I understood that Cheng and Ju were in a cohort from a university in Shandong, China to study at University of Minnesota through a collaborative program, which is called CM (China-Minnesota) program in this study. While they are from the same original university, they are from diverse backgrounds and the program offers two models for Chinese students to study in University of Minnesota. Model 1 is for those learners with *higher* English proficiency to take non-degree transferrable academic courses for one semester and then transfer to the undergraduate program in University of Minnesota. Model 2 is for those learners with

lower English proficiency to first take only ELP courses for one to two semesters before transferring to undergraduate program. After talking with more colleagues about this particular collaboration between University of Minnesota and Shandong University (pseudonym), I gathered that the outcome of this CM program is debatable. Some hold that this program is mature and valuable in providing the Chinese cohort with systematic support during their study abroad, while others argue that this program has many drawbacks in preparing students for success in their study in University of Minnesota. Increased understanding of this particular program inspired me to have some *homogeneous samples* (Patton, 2001, p. 235) in my study. Patton explains that the purpose of homogeneous samples is to describe some particular subgroup in depth. Having some participants from this particular group allows me to attain profound knowledge of their experience in a cohort. Therefore, while I continued to look for other undergraduate participants, I also invited three more students from the same CM program cohort to join the study, some of them from Model 1 and some from Model 2.

(3) *Personal network* Because my approach to ELP did not yield many participants, I decided to try snowball sampling or chain sampling (Patton, 2001, p. 237), meaning I reached out to my colleagues who work at the international student office to recommend potential participants. I believe that they are in an advantageous situation to know who may have rich information and experience to share. I sent out a recruitment email to my colleagues and friends that detailed my study and my contact information. As I asked more people for recommendations, the snowball got bigger and helped me accumulate new information-rich cases (Patton, 2001). Four undergraduate students were

recommended to me for their rich experience and passion in sharing intercultural learning experience, including one called Dani from Anderson College. Even though I started my participant recruitment in University of Minnesota, Dani completed her ESL training in ELP program in University of Minnesota and advanced to her current undergraduate study in Anderson College. When I met her for the first time to introduce my study, she delightfully started to share her different experience in both the big institution and the small college. Compared with other participants with exclusive experience at University of Minnesota, Dani's case is more unique and Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that these atypical cases "often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied" (p. 13). Her stories were fascinating and inspired me to consider the influence of campus dynamic on study abroad experience; as a result, I decided to include her in my study.

In the end, 10 students were recruited. Four of them were undergraduate students and six were taking courses in preparation for transfer to the current university in two months. Five of them were in the collaborative program between University of Minnesota and Shandong University in China, two in Model 1 and three in Model 2. Except for Dani who studies in Anderson College, all of the other participants study in the University of Minnesota. Figure 4 is an overview of the participants.

| | Ben* | Jian* | Dani* | Yang* | Shan* |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Gender | M | M | F | F | F |
| Age | 18 | 20 | 20 | 25 | 22 |
| Program | Freshman, Food Science | CM program Model 1 and transferred to Math major | Freshman, Economics (Anderson College) | Senior, English Literature | CM program Model 2 |
| Time in the U.S. | 3 years | 3 months | 1.5 years | 2 years | 4 months |
| Original place | Xi'an, Shaanxi | Shandong | Deyang, Sichuan | Wuhan, Hubei | Heze, Shandong |
| 1st time abroad | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| | Wen | Ju | Kang | Cheng | Si |
| Gender | F | F | M | F | F |
| Age | 30 | 22 | 19 | 20 | 22 |
| Program | ELP and transferred to Retail Merchandise major | CM program Model 2 | Sophomore, Finance & Accounting | CM program Model 2 | CM program Model 1 |
| Time in the U.S. | 7 months | 9 months | 1.5 years | 4 months | 8 months |
| Original city | Ha'rbín | Zibo, Shandong | Taiyuan, Shanxi | Jinan, Shandong | Liaocheng, Shandong |
| 1st time abroad | No | Yes | Yes | No | No |

Figure 4. Overview of participants and the * indicates focal participants

3.2.2.2. Selecting focal participants

After obtaining the informed consent forms from all of the 10 participants, I conducted a one-hour initial interview with each individual and observed 2-3 classes for each participant with their consent. I also conducted the first focus group interview in early March where only six students attended due to scheduling conflicts. After one and a half months of communication through various means, their schedule flexibility, desire to participate and willingness to share stories started to diverge. Some participants were apologetic for their introverted personality and lack of stories to share; some failed in communication because of their heavy workload. As I read through the data during the collection process, I started to see their stories, personalities and various experience surfacing.

I then decided to select focal participants by using *heterogeneity sampling*, also known as *maximum variation sampling* (Patton, 2001, p. 234). My purpose was to offer an in-depth description of the experience of Chinese students who were at various contexts in their undergraduate learning. I decided to focus on five students and their experiences. The participants consist of students of various ages, academic status, place of origin and length of stay in the United States. They all fit the broad criterion that was set for the study: undergraduate level including both degree and non-degree seeking. They are at various stages of undergraduate level: some were in undergraduate programs while others were preparing to transfer to an undergraduate program in two months; some were in a cohort while others applied to study in the U.S. independently; some had received high school education in America and advanced to college while others

transferred to the US in junior year; some had never left the ivory tower while others arrived with several years of work experience; some had left China for the very first time and others had had extensive overseas traveling experience. Some may argue that these individual cases are so drastically different from each other that it makes no sense to draw connections. However, as Patton posits, the logic behind the heterogeneity sampling turns this weakness into strength:

Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon. (Patton, 2001, p. 235)

Applying heterogeneity sampling aims to capture and describe central themes that cut across a variety of situations. It allowed me to achieve two kinds of findings: (1) high-quality, detailed description of each case and its uniqueness; (2) important shared themes that emerge across heterogeneous cases (Patton, 2001).

Below is a brief introduction of each focal student, which intends to provide important background information so as to better understand each participant's mediated learning experience to be discussed in Chapter 4-7.

Ben:

Rich intercultural knowledge and strong Chinese identity

Ben is an 18-year-old freshman who majors in Food Science. Coming from a wealthy family, with his uncle in the U.S., his aunt in New Zealand and his sister in France, he grew up with tremendous exposure to artifacts from other countries, such as

candies from France and Lego toys from the States. In particular, he likes to talk to adults and their stories fascinate him.

When I was young, I liked to talk, talk to them about these (stories)...My sister was telling about her babysitting experience, how she tutored the kid and picked up the kid. That was interesting because I used to have a baby sitter too. My baby sister was like a sixty-year old grandma, but she as a teenager. That kind of thing, it is kind of interesting to me. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

In addition to his international tours with his parents, Ben traveled to the United States for the first time at the age of 12 for a summer camp. He described that experience as “quite cool experience. You are only twelve and you traveled abroad to the other side of the world by plane. Went to a camp for several days. Know America a little bit” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English). That experience led to his decision to transfer to a Catholic high school in Chicago two years ago before proceeding to his undergraduate study in University of Minnesota. Two years of life in Chicago had enriched his understanding of American life and helped him develop near-native-like American English for communication.

Ben was exceptionally active in intercultural communication on campus and he was often mentioned in various reports as a representative of international students. While he was proud of his intercultural knowledge and global perspectives, what surprised me a little was his strong identity as a Chinese.

To tell you the truth, I won't stay here for the rest of my life. I will go back to China certainly because I grew up there...I still regard myself as a guest here...I am learning here...I still treat myself still as an observer. I still stay true to my identity by giving presentations about China and by sharing things...A lot of people say that I am very knowledgeable about US society and culture, but after all, I am still a Chinese and I still hold it as my responsibility to be in US to let people know about China. And that's the goal I want to achieve, and probably a bigger goal than achieving a degree here and find a job. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14 interview, original answer in English)

Although his adaptability made others believe that he would stay in the United States to develop his career, he constantly expressed his determination to return to China in the future because he is a Chinese and this identity also urges him to present a true picture of China to American communities here.

Jian

Curious, independent and believing in learning with people

Jian came from Shandong province and studied in the CM program Model 1 for the first two months and then successfully transferred to a math major in University of Minnesota. He heard about my research through his friend in the same cohort so he approached me to extend his interest through an email written in English. At the time of our first interview, he had been in the States for only two months.

At the age of 20, this young man was very proud of his traveling experience both in China and Europe, all by himself without telling his parents. He believed in freedom for choices and for inquiry, as he stated, “The more knowledge you have, the more you realize the importance of free will” (Jian, interview#1 3/4/14). He described himself as an independent person in traveling and curiosity was the driving force to account for his choice. He said, “The first motivation for me, and for other people for traveling is curiosity. You want to see everything different, original and it has never been seen, make you excited and make you interested in everything in the world” (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English).

Curiosity was also reflected through his attitude towards learning in study abroad. He explained that he has made many friends, attended different parties; interaction with people was a way for him to learn.

So I think the best way to learn is a combination between individual learning and communication. You learn individually as yourself, think things deeply and come up with a thing really original or really good. Then use this to communicate with people who have also done this process before. Both you and others have communicate and discussion, exchange your ideas and opinions, open their mind and yourself's. I think that's a good way to study...I think I can gain something new every time I have communication and discussion with others”. (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English)

As an ESL learner, he considered speaking English with others all the time as a good practice for improvement. He insisted speaking English with me during the interviewing

and during the focus group discussion where all other participants chose to speak Chinese. He also liked to read books, newspapers, watch TV and movies and play puzzle to gain knowledge and learn English.

Dani

Smart, ambitious and striking a balance between study and fun

Dani is a 20-year-old student from Sichuan province China. Although she is from a wealthy family and her sister is studying in Glasgow, U.K, she was not interested in studying abroad until her high school year. She was not excited about the boring and stressful college life in China, so she decided to go abroad. Another incident that strengthened her interest in study abroad was a trip to Europe with her parents and some family friends. Her confidence and interest in learning English were enhanced after the extensive traveling.

第一次接触到真正，第一次真正感受到英语的重要性。那时高二刚结束 18 岁。那个时候已经决定出国和学英语了半年...压力特别大，逛街时都说你过来帮我翻译一下，又怕父母走丢了。结束时我觉得原来我还可以这样和别人交流，我就觉得不错不错，学英语挺好的。 Translation: The first time for me to truly feel the importance of English. I was 18, right after sophomore year in high school, and I have been seriously learning English for half a year in preparation of study abroad. The pressure was tremendous. When we were shopping, they kept asking me to translate for them, and I was worried that my parents would get lost. At the end of the trip, I realized that I could communicate

with others like this and I felt pretty good about it. Learning English was pretty good. (Dani, interview#1, 3/7/14, original answer in Chinese)

She studied in the ELP program in University of Minnesota for a year before advancing to Anderson College for her undergraduate study in Psychology. Comparing her experience in University of Minnesota and Anderson College, she expressed her preference to her current experience because she reported that professors in Anderson College were more energetic, helpful and students here were very friendly. As the only international student in her class, she felt special and enjoyed the attention from her cohort. She felt comfortable discussing with American students, being a Statistics tutor and attending various events with local students.

She was also an ambitious person to achieve high academic scores. She said, “我对于自己的 GPA 要求比较高, 我希望所有都拿 A. Translation: I set very high standard for my GPA. I hope to get all As” (Dani, interview#1, 3/7/14, original answer in Chinese). In order to achieve this goal, she adopted a range of strategies, including study group, consulting professors and comparing notes with others. Next summer, she plans to look for internship and collaborate with professors on research projects. Her long-term goal is to continue her graduate study in the United States and finds a job here.

Yang

“我不是一个很喜欢和别人交流的人” *Translation: I am not a person who likes to communicate with others.*

Originally from Wuhan, China, Yang, this 25-year-old student came to the United States two years ago with her first Bachelor's degree in Politics from a prestigious university in Tianjin and one-year work experience in Guangzhou. Yang transferred to the University of Minnesota to finish the last two years of her second Bachelor's Degree in Literature. This is her first time to go abroad and her in-depth knowledge of herself left me with a deep impression.

观察和反思是我自己学习和调整自己的一个很重要的方式 .Translation:

Observation and reflection are an important way for me to learn and to adapt myself. (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese)

我的情绪不是一个很容易沟通的. Translation: My emotion is not easy to communicate. (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese)

我不是一个很喜欢和别人交流的人. Translation: I am not a person who likes to communicate with others. (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese)

我不是个很外向的人，会跟很多人交流和沟通，我更多时候的是一种观察，实在是观察不到的时候，我再去问别人. Translate: I am not an out-going person to communicate and interact with others. Most of the time I observe. Only when I cannot observe will I go to ask others. (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese)

我现在的阶段天天遇到冲突和变化。我是一个不太现实的人，活得太浪漫的幻想中. Translate: I encounter conflicts and changes every day. I am not a realistic person; I live in romantic fantasy and imagination. (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese)

Unlike other participants in this study, Yang expressed that she was not interested in learning about cultures during her study abroad.

我也不是为了美国的文化来这里的。有的人对于美国的制度和他们的思维方式感兴趣，想去了解，但是我自身没有那样子的。我可能对一个个个体很感兴趣，但是不会对整体的文化很感兴趣。 Translation: I am not coming to the U.S. for its culture. Some people are interested in American's way of thinking and want to know more, but I am not like that. I may be interested in individuals, but not in the entire culture. (Yang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese)

What brought Yang to the United States was her desire to develop critical thinking, which she finds lacking in China. She said, “我在国内呆的，不是我想要的东西，我要更多 critical thinking 的东西。 Translation: Staying in China is not what I want. I want more critical thinking” (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese). She described herself as a reserved, quiet, dramatic, reflective, contradictory and isolated person. Even though she volunteers in a bookstore and is surrounded by like-minded literature people, she does not have much communication with others.

Shan

Attitudes, goals and desire to make friends with excellent people

Shan is a 25-year-old junior student who majored in finance before coming to the University of Minnesota through the CM program. This is her first time to go abroad. Because of her limited English proficiency, she was placed in model 2. In other words, she needed to take at least one semester of ESL classes before transferring to the Finance

major in University of Minnesota. When I met her for the first interview, she had been in the U.S. for about two months and she impressed me with her delightful personality and positive attitudes towards study abroad.

Shan described herself as an indecisive person but she was extremely certain on the decision to study abroad. When asked why she studies abroad, she is clear with her goal to expand her network and to make friends with excellent people.

我出国并不是为了找一个好工作，我就是想让自己见识见识，接触一下不同的人，比自己更高级的人，多学点知识，扩展一下自己的社交层面。

Translate: I go abroad not for a good job, but I want to experience more, get in touch with different people, people at a higher level than me, to learn more knowledge and to expand my social contact. (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese)

和牛掰的人交朋友。可能是我自己英语不好，先别说国外的人，就是中国的同学，他们来的时间比较长，他们的英文说得很流，和国外得人交流很自如，这些人我觉得很崇拜。

Translation: To make friends with excellent people. Maybe because my English is poor, not to mention non-Chinese people, even Chinese classmates, if they stay here longer, speak fluent English and communicate with foreigners naturally, I have high admiration for them. (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese)

Among all the participants in this study, Shan's English proficiency may be the most limited, but she constantly shared with me her endeavors to improve her English. She

particularly took pride in shopping and fixing a bankcard problem all by herself. Even though her cohort sometimes questions why she needs to strive for a good grade, she continuously reminds herself of the goal to improve English and seek opportunities to settle down in the U.S.. By the second interview, she was pleased and proud to tell me that she has made much progress in the semester. Her experience in the U.S. empowers her with more confidence and determination to stay for study and even for life.

3.2.3. Data collection

Data were collected from early February to mid May 2014 through various methods: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, observations, social media post collections and other documents. Figure 5 demonstrates the timeline of data collection and the rationale of each method will be discussed below.

| Data collection method | Number collected | Time of collection |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Semi-structured interviews | 20 (1 hour each) | February to May, 2014 |
| Focus group discussion | 2 (2 hours each) | March and May, 2014 |
| In-class observations | 30 classes | February to May, 2014 |
| Out-of-class observation | 5 observations | March to May, 2014 |
| Social media post collection | Numerous | February to May, 2014 |
| Documents | Numerous | February to May, 2014 |

Figure 5: Overview of data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews

The interview is one of the most important sources of case study information (Yin, 2013). Yin believes that interviewees can help a researcher to identify other relevant sources of evidence through interviews. I resonate with Patton that the purpose of my interview is “to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn *their* terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of *their* individual perceptions and experience” (2001, p. 348). I had two individual interviews with each participant, one at the beginning of the data collection in February and one at the end in May. The first interview was to get to know the participant and understand his/her background in relation to the study abroad decision. For those who newly arrived, I asked them to picture their future study in terms of what materials to use and who to communicate with; for those who have been here for at least one semester, I asked them to recall what have been helpful in their language and culture learning. The second interview aimed to have participants reflect on their learning and mediated activities over the semester. Between the two interviews, I also arranged additional interviews with those participants who I had more follow-up questions or requests for clarification on some of the points they mentioned in the first interview. All of the interviews were audio recorded and saved in a password-protected computer.

In order to elicit the participants’ stories in a natural flow of interaction, I designed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) with open-ended questions and the interview was conducted in a conversational style. This design gave the interviewees flexibility to generate responses without choosing from a fixed list of

answers, and also reduced interviewer effects and bias (Patton, 2001). Additionally, I spent some time contemplating what type of questions could help elicit responses to answer my research questions. My research purpose is to explore how they mediate different resources, both physical tools and semiotic systems, in learning English and cultures in a sociocultural environment, so my interview protocol consisted of different types of questions to relate their learning with social, historical and cultural contexts: for example, (1) background question, the first question *Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?* and *What made you decide to study abroad?* is to “elicit the respondent’s own categorical worldview” (Patton, 2001, p.351), and allows the readers to make their own connection between the participant’s background and motivations to study abroad. (2) Experience questions such as *What activities do you find useful for your language and cultural learning?* And *How did you engage in these activities?* (3) Opinion and value questions such as *Do you think your understanding of American cultures will be changed and explain why?* During the interview process, I got inspired and raised spontaneous follow-up questions regarding feelings, such as *How do you feel about your first independent shopping experience?* I find it useful to propose various types of questions because these questions focus on different dimension of the interviewee and the variety may reduce the tediousness of the interview (Pattern, 2001).

However, I was also very careful to avoid asking many *why* questions. I was very tempted to put *why* questions but as Patton (2001) suggests, I referred back to my research topic and decided to specify the questions more. Instead of asking *Why do you only hang out with Chinese students?* I asked *Who do you hang out with? What made you*

decide to hang out with them? What have you learned from these people? These specific questions helped to guide interviewees to give more detailed and relevant responses.

I gave participants the flexibility to choose either Chinese or English or both for the interviews so that they could feel more comfortable with speaking and would not feel as though their English were being tested or a barrier. Most of the participants with the exception of Ben and Jian, preferred to speak Chinese with me. Ben said he could use any language and then the actual conversation always started with English. Jian believed that the success of learning a target language was to grab every possible opportunity to use the language, so he preferred me to ask him questions in English and he would answer in English. Despite their preferred language, the participants had a lot of code switching and code mixing, meaning they mixed both English and Chinese in the interviews.

Focus group

Focus group was adopted to provide a platform for all the participants to share their experience. The first focus group occurred in early March but only six participants could attend because others had class conflicts. The second focus group occurred in early May and seven participants attended. I prepared some food and drinks and had the first 20 minutes for them to socialize informally. The purpose was to create a relaxing and comfortable environment for the participants to get to know each other (Patton, 2001). At the beginning of the focus group discussion, I also reminded everyone that they should not feel obligated or pressured to agree with each other or to come up with a right answer; the purpose of the focus group is for them to enjoyably share their ideas and perceptions.

I prepared different sets of questions for the focus group: about self, language learning, cultural learning, about community and mediated learning (Appendix C). I also invited participants to write down on the whiteboard the resources that have helped them learn English and cultures, including tools, signs and people. The participants seemed a little nervous to answer the first few questions but once someone shared a story that aroused empathy, the rest of the group were active in sharing their perceptions or similar experience. Focus group demonstrated two major advantages in this study: (1) It was efficient to elicit similar and/or differing experience when all the participants were gathered in one room to respond to the same questions. (2) Interactions among participants enhanced data quality (Patton, 2001, p. 386). Participants tended to provide balanced views on the topic and avoided false or extreme views.

Observations

While interviews provide an opportunity for the participants to share their perspectives, direct observation is an important means for me to collect first-hand accounts of a phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Patton (2001) points out the advantages of using direct observation in research: (1) to better understand the context where people interact; (2) to allow inquirers to be open to discover insights; (3) to allow inquirers to capture things that may be neglected; (4) to learn about things that people would be unwilling to talk about in interviews; (5) to help inquirers to move beyond selected perceptions of others; (6) to allow inquirers to draw on personal knowledge during the formal interpretation stage of analysis. These are exactly the reasons why I adopted observation in the data collection.

In order to attain first hand organic accounts for participants' mediated learning, I observed both their classes and their out-of-class interaction with various communities. At the end of the first interview, I asked each participant to suggest some classes that they would feel comfortable having me to observe and provided their instructors' contact. I then contacted the instructors for permission to sit in the class. In my email to the instructor, I explained the purpose of observation and what I would do in class, and I promised not to disturb the class. After the instructor agreed to have me observe the class, I would also request the instructor to keep the participant's involvement in confidence so as to protect their identity in my study. Altogether 11 instructors granted me permission to observe the class and told the class that I was there for general observation without mentioning the participant's name. I observed 30 classes ranging from ESL courses to academic courses. My role was an onlooker (Patton, 2001) in most classes but I was also a participant in the Academic Study Skills class where I volunteered. Direct and participatory observation allowed me to see the participants' interaction and dynamic in class.

My focus was to observe the participants' engagement in class and interaction with different people in out-of-class contexts, including what materials they use, who they interact with and how they attend to different activities. During my observation, I used various marks to distinguish different types of notes. For instance, the texts in a circle are my interpretation and comments on a certain phenomenon; the star * indicates questions that I have to ask the participant after class for clarification or explanation.

Social media post and documents

Social media posts and documents serve as supplementary data in this study. Even though I have invited the participants to share their journals with me, they all said that they rarely write journals. Instead, they often share thoughts and communicate with friends on social media websites. The most common social media in use is Wechat, also known as wēi xìn 微信 in Chinese. It is similar to instant messaging and allows voice message. The second common social media is Facebook, where they use mainly to communicate with friends in the United States because Facebook is blocked in China. Among all participants in this study, five of them allowed me to access their Wechat post and three accepted my friend requests on Facebook. Social media post reflects the powerful influence that technology has brought to international students' sojourner life. I am curious and open to see if participants would share their feelings and/or photos that can reflect their mediated learning during study abroad.

Besides social media posts, various documents were also collected as additional source of information. For instance, Kang said that he seldom posts on social media, but he enjoys reading others' articles and he was willing to share the articles with which he resonates. I also collected some handouts that were distributed in the classes I observed. As Patton argues, "documents prove valuable not only because of what can be learned directly from them but also as stimulus for paths of inquiry that can be pursued only through direct observation and interviewing" (p. 294). These documents may not give me direct insights into the learners' study abroad experience, but they inspire me to ask more questions and direct me to more aspects of observation.

3.2.4. Data analysis

It is widely agreed that in qualitative studies, data collection, data analysis and report writing are interrelated and occur simultaneously (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2001; Yin, 2013). The interactive model of data analysis in Figure 6 informs me through the analysis process.

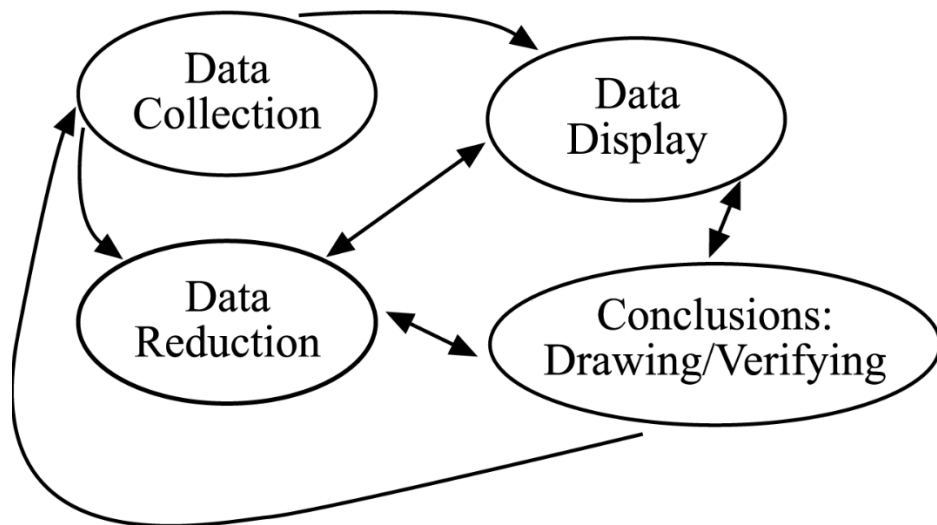


Figure 6: Components of data analysis: Interactive model (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 12)

This interactive model depicts the dynamic and cyclical process of data collection. It shows that data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification are interwoven before, during, and after data collection in parallel form, to make up the general domain of “analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 12). Another helpful guidance on data analysis is the analytic options suggested by Maxwell (2005): memos, categorizing strategies and connecting strategies. Therefore, I started the data analysis right after the first data collection and constantly revisited the collected data to confirm and disconfirm my previous analysis. Grappling with tremendous amount and diverse

types of data requires exceptional organizational skills. I decided to use a reputable web-based data management system called Dedoose. This system allows me to upload various types of data and enter coding. Dedoose supported me to record within-case and cross-case analysis, and it facilitates coding process and generates list of excerpts to match the coding system.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Dedoose provided technical support to organize the data for me, but I was the one who assigned coding, drew connections and made comparisons. What is worth mentioning is that, Dedoose underwent a major collapse in May and caused a loss of large amount of data to many scholars. Fortunately, I always exported the coded data from Dedoose after each coding activity, so I did not lose any data. This incident helped me understand the importance of preparing multiple back-up copies of data.

Below are three major strategies of my data analysis:

(1) *Memos* As I was interviewing and taking observational notes, I constantly wrote down short phrases, ideas, questions, key concepts and reminders for later contemplation, which are defined as memos by Creswell (1998). I also wrote memos when I was listening to the interview recordings and reading transcripts. These memos helped me timely record what I saw or heard in the data and “develop tentative ideas about categories and relationship” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96).

(2) *Categorizing strategies* This stage is also the data reduction stage in the interactive model, when I adopted various approaches to uncover themes in the data. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data reduction “refers to the process of

selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up filed notes or transcriptions” (p. 10). Coding is an important strategy in data reduction. After the first round of coding, I generated over 70 codes, including material categories such as TV, books and subtitle, and action coding such as talking, observing and comparing. Coding helps me to fracture data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison (Maxwell, 2005; Strauss, 1987). I entered the coding in Dedoose and assigned specific color to the excerpts to match the coding; the Dedoose displayed all coding that I have assigned in a form of word cloud, which allowed me to see the frequency of the coding. I revisited the excerpts with the same coding and started to organize the data into broader themes and issues.

While categorizing analysis, I started with organizational categories, meaning categorizing the coding in broad areas or issues that are established prior to data collection. Before the data collection, I anticipated a few categories such as community, physical materials and semiotic signs. In organizational categorizing, I sorted the data into these anticipated bins for further analysis. According to Maxwell (2005), *organizational categories* may be useful in organizing data but not in making sense of the data; therefore, I developed *substantive categories* and *theoretical categories*. In other words, by substantive categories, I sorted the data according to the “description of participants’ concepts and beliefs” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). By theoretical categories, I placed the coded data into the sociocultural framework, such as other-regulation, self-mediation and mediated through semiotic system.

(3) *Connecting strategies* This stage is reflected as the data display and conclusion steps in the interactive model. Connecting strategies aim to adopt various approaches to understand data and identify relationships among the different aspects of the text (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Maxwell, 2005). I drew many graphs and networks to display the categorized data and strived to discover connections among them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also used profiles and vignettes (Seidman, 2012) to evidence the complex relationships among different elements.

In analyzing data, I established a folder for each participant to document the materials they used, the way they used them, and evidence to show they gained learning from this mediation, including their self-reports, significant stories, my observation and social media posts. I then elicited repeated themes, key words and significant evidence for each participant. At the first round, broad themes included using tools, using signs and emotion. For instance, both traditional tools such as books and modern tools such as computers were included in tools. After closer inspection, I then detected that some tools had special significance to participants' learning, such as *Scarlet Letter* to Ben and the psychological textbook for Dani; therefore, in the second round of theme drawing, I draw a sub theme on meaningful artifacts.

After this, I conducted a cross-case analysis to compare and contrast all participants. Even though all participants had their unique and distinctive mediation methods, I discovered several shared types of mediational tools across multiple cases, including similar resources that they all used and the ways they interacted with others.

It is important to remember that tools and semiotic systems are often used by participants collaboratively, and that people's influence and self-thinking also often intersect to influence learning process.

Along the process of analyzing data, conclusions were made and verified constantly. Verification included revisiting the field notes and inviting my colleagues and advisor to review the data. The interactive model reflects the dynamic and cyclical process of data analysis. The connecting strategies were beneficial not only because they draw "*similarities* that can be used to sort data into categories independently of context", but also they "look for relationships that *connect* statements and events within a context into a coherent whole" (Maxwell, 2005, p 99).

3.2.5. Triangulation

In order to ensure the credibility of my interpretation and conclusion, I incorporated triangulation in the study (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). In particular, I adopted multiple methods and multiple sources to elicit alternative analysis. As shown in Figure 5, I used various data collection methods to achieve both the participants' voices and ethnographic observations of their behavior in natural settings. Take Dani's data analysis for instance. After Dani's report on how her peers in Anderson College were helpful to her, I visited my observational field notes to identify any observed moments of her interaction with peers. There was evidence in my notes to show her constant interaction with her classmate Quinn. In the second interview, I asked Dani for more details on how they learned inside and outside the classroom. During the

second interview, I also realized that her other Thai friend Chawit was resourceful to her language learning. I then requested their message record on WhatsApp. She kindly offered a set of screenshots for me to analyze as data. Therefore, I sought various sources of data to analyze how Dani used differing forms of resources to mediate learning. Findings are more compelling with support from various forms of data.

I warned myself against the misconception that triangulation should yield to the same result; instead, I was open to any inconsistencies because understanding these inconsistencies would indicate an opportunity for me to reexamine the relationship between my inquiry approaches and the phenomenon (Patton, 2001).

3.2.6. Positionality

Maxwell raises concern of two types of threats to validity of qualitative studies: “researcher bias and the effect of the researcher on the individuals studied” (2005, p. 108). The researcher is part of the world under study, and his or her presence is an inescapable influence to the informant’s performance in both interviews and ethnographic observations. The researcher’s values and perspectives may have influence on the conclusions of the study.

I am a native Chinese and have study abroad experience in both England and the United States. Interacting with local communities is the rule of thumb in my study abroad experience, which has proved to be extremely beneficial to my English learning and cultural adjustment. I believe that purposefully staying away from other students of the same country will push a person to get out of the comfort zone to communicate with local

people independently, thus enhancing their communicative skills and cultural exposure. As a result, I hold strong advocacy for study abroad and see the benefits outweigh its risks. When I interviewed participants, I wish they could share the same insights as me and wanted to tell them what learning strategies were useful. My bias could be influential in interpreting the data collected.

In order to minimize the possible influence of my bias, I adopted the following measures: (1) I examined the interview protocol and questions for multiple times to avoid leading questions. I also ran the questions through other non-participants for feedback so as to make sure the questions were clear and not leaning to a certain answer. (2) I constantly reminded the participants of my role as a listener but not an evaluator, so there was no right or wrong answer. I was there to hear the most truthful answers from their heart. I also assured them of confidentiality so they felt safe to share their genuine insights of the experience. (3) As mentioned above, I implemented a variety of methods to triangulate the data collection and analysis, and also shared my analysis with my advisor in order to gain alternative interpretations. (4) In the entire process, I reminded myself to be a professional researcher to embrace the data with neutral and open attitudes. My goal is not to match the data with my assumptions but to tell the stories in thick descriptions within a thoroughly detailed context.

While my biases may propose challenges in the study, on the other hand, my experience as a study abroad returnee also assists me to connect with the participants. I went through many of the positive experience and challenges they are undergoing, and I

share empathy to their stories. My study abroad background and passion in listening to their stories have successfully connected me with them along the sojourner journey.

Chapter 4: Mediated Learning through Artifacts and Other People

In sociocultural theory, all human-made objects are artifacts and these artifacts can mediate our learning and interaction with both the external world and the internal world (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). All ten participants reported a wide variety of materials that facilitated and mediate their learning: from books to newspapers, from cell phone apps to computer games. Some of the materials changed or shaped the participants' interactions with the outside world while others were impactful on their internal world.

4.1. Materials

Books and academic readings were materials constantly referred to in interviews. Both Ben and Jian said that one of the most effective ways to learn how to write academic papers was to read more scholarly journals and academic writing. Among all of the participants, Ben demonstrates higher English proficiency and he does not consider English learning as a big concern for him now. However, when he recalled his English learning, he stressed that reading academic and professional writings was beneficial for him. He stated:

Reading, it is all about reading. Academic readings. Not necessarily pure academic readings but have to be professional... The mastery of academic English is learn how to compose a professional paper. How you use those words, how you structure your paper. Most of them can be reflected from other people's articles, journals. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

Jian echoed that reading has helped him not only to improve English but also gave him topics to communicate with others. Besides academic books, Jian likes to read the university newspaper, which is free and available at every corner of the University of Minnesota. He said that university newspaper helped him understand the happenings on campus and better connected him with his American peers. It was also a fun and easy reading so he would feel less stressed; in the end, reading the campus newspaper increased his confidence as a reader.

Wen said that textbooks helped her learn academic vocabulary and her interaction with the book adjusted from looking up every new word to focusing on key words.

很多专业词汇都是从书上来的，看书时间比较多...其实所有考试上的知识都是靠我看书看来的。我最开始还会查单词，但是后期我发现效率太低了。现在就顺着往下读，如果我觉得这个单词是 key word，我就会查一查，但大多数我都不查了。 Translation: Many vocabulary words about my major were learned from the books. I spent more time on reading... Most of the knowledge in the test, I learned from reading. Initially I still looked up vocabulary words, but then I found it too inefficient. Instead, I read on and if I see a word that is like a key word to me, I will look it up. Most of the time I don't look them up. (Wen, interview#1, 2/24/14, original answer in Chinese)

American textbooks were a challenge for Wen, but at the same time, they offered an opportunity for Wen to learn how to improve reading efficiency. Wen started with looking up every single new word, but soon she realized it was too time-consuming. As she read more, her exposure the academic terms was increased. She gradually understood

the meanings from context and adapted her learning strategy. She learned to identify key words and decided if a new word would hinder her understanding of the overall idea. In this way, her learning strategy was improved and she reported to know better how to learn.

Besides language learning, reading also enhances participants' understanding of culture and history. Jian, when talking about the campus newspaper, told me that he benefited a lot from the puzzles in the newspaper. The puzzle section was useful for him to practice reading explanations, interpret meaning, review vocabulary and understand American daily culture since many words are related to daily TV shows, youth culture and different ways of expression.

Another example of reading as a mediational tool is when Ju mentioned the first novel she read since coming to University of Minnesota-*The Red Scarf Girl*, an English memoir written by a Chinese author Ji-li Jiang about her experience during Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s to the 1970s. Ju was fascinated when reading stories about China in English language. As she stated, “如果遇到不懂的单词就划起来，然后看完一章后就查。看看就是中国人是如何向美国人介绍中国的历史，挺不同的。我们会 有一个 book club，要我们选书，我对这个感兴趣。 Translation: If I encountered a new word, I underlined it and waited till the end of the chapter to look up the meanings. I can see how Chinese people introduce Chinese history to the Americans. It is quite different. We have a book club and I am interested in this” (Ju, interview#1, 2/19/14, original answer in Chinese), Ju not only took pride in finding a more efficient way to

enlarge her vocabulary without interrupting reading, but also increased her interest and knowledge in how history can be presented differently to target audience.

What's worth noting is that these materials are not mediating learning in an isolated way. On the contrary, reading is often accompanied with various tools and interactional approaches to enhance participants' learning. For instance, Ben read academic papers in English and reviewed his own writing simultaneously; Jian consistently applied his knowledge from reading to daily conversation with his friends and Ju stated that she would read novels in both Chinese language and English language to compare writing and ways of expression. Below is another example of Yang's learning through a combination of various tools.

Yang: multiple tools for listening and GRE study

Yang's listening training and preparation for the GRE is another example of how multiple tools are utilized to mediate her learning and the test preparation process. Yang described herself as an independent and individual learner because of her introverted personality. Instead of seeking help from other people, she would exploit a range of materials to help, including vocabulary books, vocabulary CD, audio books, movie sound tracks and novels. She considered herself as more of an audio learner. She reported listening to audio books was a relaxing and effective way for her to learn, as she stated, “不光是听单词，还有听有声书，它的发音会对大脑有刺激。中文我不需要念出来记，我看就可以记住。但是英文要有发音，听了大脑会有印象，这样记它才会有意义。 Translation: Not just the vocabulary but also the audio books. Its sound can stimulate

the brain to work. For Chinese learning, I don't need to read it out. I can remember by seeing it. But for English, when it gives out sound, I will have an impression in my mind; it is only meaningful to remember it this way" (Yang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese). My observation of Yang's part-time work in a campus office also shows that she often plays audio books in her computer while she is working. When other colleagues wonder what she is listening to and why, she would pleasantly explain how much she enjoys audio books. Listening is such an effective way for her to learn that she sometimes records her literature classes and reviews at home. She finds recording professors' lectures extremely useful to understand some concepts and explanations that she may have missed in class.

Another useful material for Yang is movie sound tracks. Even before she studied abroad, she would listen to movie sound tracks to improve her listening comprehension and to gain deeper impression of vocabulary. In particular, *Sound of Music* was a memorable movie because she has listened to it for enough times that she can repeat some of the lyrics. She takes pleasure in this learning experience with *Sound of Music*, “感觉蛮亲切的。感觉好像听中文一样，不用动脑筋就在脑子里了。 Translation: I feel so connected. It feels like listening to Chinese. It stays in my memory without efforts” (Yang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese). As a literature major, reading is an integral part of her academic life and personal hobby. She explained that she would read extensively for main ideas but would spend time on reading some works intensively for in-depth learning.

The overarching belief in sociocultural theory is that learners' development and learning process is informed by their social, cultural and historical background (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertch, 1996). Learning methods that are proved useful in their past learning will be adopted for future learning. Yang is one example. She reported that she applied the aforementioned strategies to her GRE study.

我准备一方面通过听来加深对单词的印象，另一方面就是通过上下文的结合。。。。我想选择一本不算太长，但是写得比较好的一本书，以精读的状态把它记下来。。虽然不会有所有 GRE 词汇，但是它会有一部分 GRE 词汇...它可以帮助我在词汇上 level 的提升，还有就是对我写作上的提升。不仅是记得这个词，还有就是记得这个词怎么用...基本上我不会放过每一个单词，我会把每个不懂的单词查一遍。然后我会把一些好的段子记下来。其实我还是比较需要中国的学习方法，其实我觉得背书是对学习语言最好的方式。背一些语言好的然后学习去写东西，去表达东西。

Translation: One way is to gain a deeper impression of the vocabulary through listening, and the other is to learn the vocabulary in contexts. I want to choose a not-very-long but well-written book, and memorize the new vocabulary through intensive reading. Although not all GRE vocabulary will be there, there must be some...It can help me improve my overall level of vocabulary and my writing. I not only memorize this word but also remember how to use it....(intensive reading) basically I will not miss any word. I will look up every new word to me. Then I will memorize good paragraphs by heart. I am still very keen on Chinese

learning method. I think memorization is a best way to learn languages.

Memorizing some well-phrased paragraphs can help me with writing and

expressing my thoughts. (Yang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese)

She bought a Webster University Dictionary and marked all the vocabulary against a GRE vocabulary book. Then whenever she read other books, if she encountered a new word, she would look up the word in the dictionary. If the word happened to be marked as a GRE word, she would pay extra attention to memorize and learn how to use the word. Now she wants to read a book called *Howards End*, a book she has read in class before. She wants to reread the book in an intensive way, meaning understanding every single new word and memorizing some texts. Even though *Howards End* is a novel, Yang believes that reading the novel will familiarize her with vocabulary as well as improve her holistic writing skills.

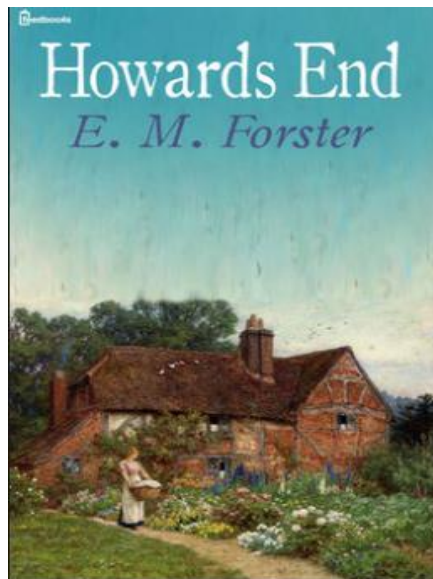


Figure 7: Yang't tool: *Howards End*

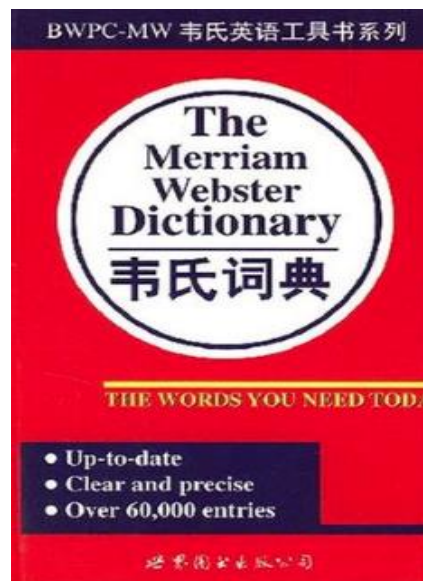


Figure 8: Yang's tool: The dictionary

As we can see from the aforementioned examples, textbooks, academic papers, puzzles, novels and so on, became mediational tools through interaction with the individuals. Sociocultural theorists hold that all materials are culturally constituted and are ready to offer potential affordances for learners; however, they are not mediational tools until they are utilized by human beings to direct activities or to shape goals (Swain et al, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). The participants in this study approached these materials in differing ways, but the tools changed the participants' knowledge span, understanding of self and maneuvers of learning (Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). For instance, Ben reported he treated others' academic papers as examples to learn how to use the words and how to compose a structure; Wen reported that she approached her textbooks as resources for exam preparation; Jian said he expanded his cultural knowledge and communication topics by skimming the university publications; and Ju reported learning more about her own culture and various writing styles through novels. In Yang's case, she reported that she interacted with the resources in multiple directions and back and forth. She has adopted the class reading to achieve multiple purposes: to improve reading, improve writing, expand vocabulary and prepare for GRE test.

4.2. Online tools

With the advancement of technology, online tools and resources also emerged as affordances for development and participants' interaction with these online tools lead to mediated learning. The Internet provides a wide range of opportunities and platform for learners to gain knowledge, such as movies, news, websites and social media. All female

participants in this study mentioned that they have enlarged their vocabulary through online information, such as English vocabulary for cosmetics and food. Si said, “浏览美国网页可以明白很多意思...现在不知道怎么写, 但是看了就知道什么意思。例如化妆品, 唇膏 lipstick, 粉底 foundation, 刚来不知道什么意思, 现在知道了.

Translation: Browsing American websites can help me understand many meanings...Now I don't know how to write them, but I know what they mean when I see them, such as cosmetics, lip stick, foundation. I didn't know what they meant when I firstly arrived but now I do” (Si, interview#1, 2/18/14, original answer in Chinese).

Ju and Shan emphasized the power of watching movies and both learned some English phrases through the TV show called *2 Broke Girls*. Shan said, “英文字幕特别好, 有时候说一些特别当地表达的, 我学到一个 BFF, Best Friend Forever。我学了就记住了, 然后我就告诉我的同学, You are my BFF。我想学习当地地道的表达。。。对听力和口语都有帮助, 可以学到很地道的表达. Translation: The English subtitles are especially good. Sometimes they have very authentic way of talking. I learned the phrase BFF, Best Friend Forever, I learned it and remembered it, then I told my friend, You are my BFF. I want to learn very authentic way of expression...also useful for improving listening and speaking. I can learn the authentic way of expressing ideas” (Shan, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese). The phrase BFF, to Shan, was not only a new phrase that she mastered, but also a symbol of increased confidence. She felt very proud of being able to use this phrase in the correct contexts and felt confident that she could learn well.

Other learning takes place in reading news on line. For instance, Ben and Kang were amazed in comparing differing perspectives reflected in news reports on same issues. Kang said he paid close attention to the news coverage on the world-shocking flight disappearance of MH370 that happened in March of 2014. Being in the study abroad setting allowed him immediate accessibility to a wide variety of western media, and his impression of western media coverage of this accident was “西方的媒体显然报道更快速，更直接，更果断. Translation: Western media coverage is apparently faster, more direct and more precise” (Kang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese), while the Chinese media coverage was “很明显中国的媒体在含糊其辞，都不知道在干什么. Translation: Apparently Chinese media coverage was very unclear” (Kang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese). However, Kang’s interaction with the media resources did not cease at his impression. This comparison also led him to further contemplate the reason behind the difference. He said that after reading many first-hand news reports during study abroad, he analyzed that the vagueness of Chinese news coverage was a result of government censorship, “显然各种不可抗拒的因素，中国媒体的自由性，新闻的透明度有待提高啊. Translation: all sorts of overpowering factors. Press freedom and news transparency in China need to be improved” (Kang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese).

On the other hand, Kang also reported that media information revealed to him a more genuine picture of American life.

我们在国内看美国电影或者电视剧大部分还是一些光彩的一面，在我们日常生活中，特别在西岸，有一些不安全的因素，特别是有一些索马里的黑人。

在高速公路口有一些贫困的无家可归的人。这些在电影里面都不是很常见的。在美国生活中也感受到这样生活上的差异也还是存在的。...我觉得这才是真正的美国吧，不是我们原来想象中的多么美好。有一句话说：不要对美国有太多的期望，就不会有太多的失望。

Translation: What I saw in American movies and TV shows while I was in China mostly showed the good side of American life. However, in our daily life here, especially on the west bank of the campus, there are some unsafe issues, especially with the Somalis and the homeless people on the highway exits, which cannot be seen in movies. My life in the U.S. gives me the opportunity to see the gap in wealth. I feel this is true America, not as ideal as we had expected. There is a sentence, Don't expect too much from America and you will not get much disappointment. (Kang, interview#1, 2/21/14, original answer in Chinese)

Admittedly, I argue that Kang's statement expressed his own prejudice and bias on certain communities, but what I want to stress here is the knowledge gaining process through his interaction with different media resources. Ben echoed with the same conclusion as he compared what he saw in Chicago areas and what he saw on TV.

The study abroad setting granted them with accessibility to more resources and their interaction with the materials mediated their opportunities to compare cultures, perspectives and adjust their attitudes towards countries. Online tools mediated these two participants' cultural knowledge and directed them to reflect on multiple cultures so as to attain higher-level mental activities.

Dani: grammar tutoring via WhatsApp messaging

In our first interview, Dani already stressed that she needed to discipline herself from checking her phone in class. I gathered that Dani used her phone and social media a lot from her post on line and her quick response to my messages. Even though she indicated that online resources could be a distraction for her study; she shared a fascinating piece of learning experience via WhatsApp. One day she was chatting with her Thai friend Chawit about her feelings of the class, and the informal messaging turned into a grammar learning opportunity for her. Even though Chawit was also an English language learner, Dani reported that Chawit's English proficiency was higher than hers. Her friend patiently pointed out the grammar errors she has made in the message and the discussion developed further to discuss verb tense and verb conjugation. WhatsApp has served as a platform for Dani to learn from her friend. Dani adopted this online tool to mediate her learning by asking questions and interacting with her friend to achieve knowledge development. Through interactive Q and A via WhatsApp, Dani gained knowledge about verb tenses. Her learning through collaborative work with a more capable peer Chawit was improved than when she was solving the problem alone. This is a theoretical concept called ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) created by Vygotsky (1978). More details of how this ZPD occurred will be elaborated in the next section, but we can see here that WhatsApp functioned as a mediational tool to foster Dani's learning.

Technology is part of learning and daily life, particularly for younger generations. More than a decade ago, Lantolf (2000) named technology as a kind of mediational artifacts in sociocultural perspectives and called for more studies in this vein, as he stated,

“The effect of artifact mediation, especially technology, on language learning also needs to be carefully and extensively explored” (p. 94). The study of technology in relation to language acquisition is growing and many studies prove the positive influence of technologies in various aspects. Ortega (2009) reviews and discovers, “A stream of socioculturally oriented research about L2 learning and technology has concentrated on exploring the learning about target discourse and cultures that accrues from participation in online communication either with classmates or in geographically and culturally distant classroom communities” (p. 248).

The notion that technologies have provided affordances for learning is supported by many sociocultural scholars. Kern (2006) stated that technology medium creates “sites for interpersonal communication, multiple publication, discuss learning, community participation, and identity formation” (p. 192). Dani’s WhatsApp experience with a more capable English speaker is an example of using technology to negotiate through a linguistic concept with a peer. Dani provided the screen shots of the original message exchange with Chawit (Figures 13-20) and I gathered that: within 18 minutes, there were 90 messages, 29 from Dani and 61 from her classmate Chawit. This messaging frequency helped to account for the engagement of Dani’s learning in this virtual learning community. Ortega holds, “the production and consumption of online (and traditional) texts that draw on multimodal forms of meaning making, including language, images and sound, has also been identified as a particularly important site of language and literacy learning” (2009, p. 250) and individuals with accessibility to and competence in

technologies especially young learners can exploit the positive results for both their academic study and identity formation.

Like face-to-face communication, “(t)echnology-based communication affords L2 learners rich opportunities for identity negotiation and reconstruction and social and cultural learning, as well as unprecedented support for literacy development” (Ortega, 2009, p. 253). When individuals interact with the materials with a purpose and strategies, these resources can lead students to further contemplate, to reflect and to other higher mental activities, such as analyzing, problem solving, comparing, shaping goals and directing future behavior. Lee (2011) conducted a study on the role of blogging in developing intercultural competence during study abroad. She examined 16 American undergraduate students’ participation in blogs and their intercultural competence over one-semester study abroad experience. The results showed that blogs afforded students the opportunity to work independently and reflect upon cross-cultural issues (p. 87). In my study, from Si’s cosmetic vocabulary growth to the term BFF that Shan learned from the show *2 Broke Girls*, from Dani’s grammar lesson via WhatsApp to Kang’s critical thinking on media reports on the MH370, online resources are options for learning. More accessibility to online resources expanded learners’ knowledge of other cultures and “increase cultural self-awareness” (Ortega, 2009, p. 248) at the same time.

4.3. Significant artifacts

Ben: Mrs. Kotty and Scarlet Letter

During his first year in Chicago for high school, Ben underwent considerable amount of pressure from schoolwork, as he was the only Chinese student and one of the few ESL learners in class. In one of the reading classes, when they were required to read the classic novel *The Scarlet Letter*, he was feeling depressed and frustrated due to his limited English. His first English teacher Mrs. Kotty sensed his frustration and purchased a simplified version for him and encouraged him to read for the idea instead of trying to understand every detail.

My very first English teacher in my high school, she was great. She helped me a lot to adapt to this academic environment. She actually opened the door for me to the US academic culture. She answered questions as often as possible to me and she paid specific attention to me. . . .Scarlet Letter, a novel in 1800, the language was written in a traditional way. I just arrived in the country less than 6 months. I apparently can't read that. She actually gave me a simplified version. She bought the book and she just gave it to me. She said like, 'Ben [pseudonym], take it.

Don't worry about anything, just read it. Any long as you get the main idea, it is fine. (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English)

Mrs. Kotty's sensitivity, attentiveness and the action of giving him a simplified novel is significant in Ben's study and life in the U.S. He said that he still maintained a very good relationship with Mrs. Kotty and she wrote him recommendations to college. According to Ben, Mrs. Kotty opened the door for him to learn English and U.S. academic culture, which is impactful for his college writing class to be discussed later.

For Ben, the simplified version of *The Scarlet Letter* gave him easier access to the meaning of the book, and thus helped him gain enough understanding so as to participate in class discussion. In this regard, this book mediated and changed his interaction with the outside world. Additionally, Mrs. Kotty was an important figure in his English learning. She paid special attention to him and helped him establish confidence. Mrs. Kotty also asked him to focus on the meaning instead of the language, which may explain to him the strategies and focus of reading class in American classrooms. Mrs. Kotty made an effort to understand her international student Ben and her extra assistance transformed the learning environment for Ben from *transmission* teaching to *dialogic* teaching (Wertsch, 1994; Swain et al., 2010). Ben remembered Mrs. Kotty's instruction and applied to his future learning. In our interviews and class observation, Ben often referred to his writing as focusing on meanings but not grammar. Mrs. Kotty's influence may account for Ben's focus as a learner and writer.

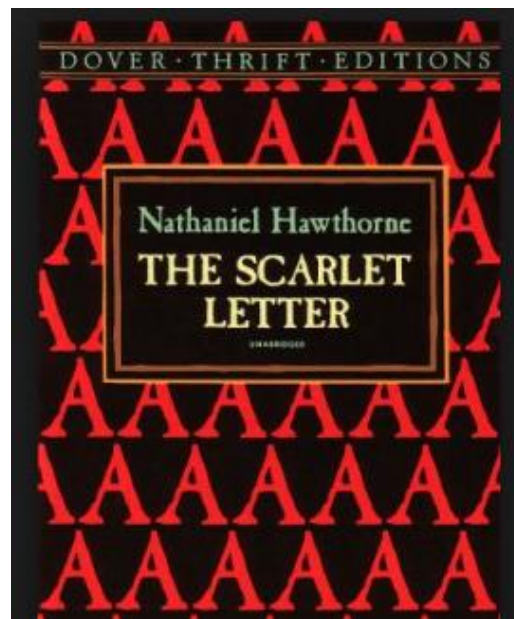


Figure 9: Ben's tool: *The Scarlet Letter*

Dani: 1st psychology textbook

Similar to Ben, Dani also constantly mentioned a book that made a change in her study. For her, it was not a novel but a textbook, the first textbook for her Psychology major. In the very first semester as an undergraduate Psychology major, her professor told the class to read the textbook, saying it was a simple and easy-read. Dani spent several weeks reading the book but still found it too difficult to comprehend.

第一周结束后，那周我整个周日在叔叔家住，他们出去玩，我整个人整天在家，翻开书第一页看了半个小时，很多单词不会，看不懂，就不想去读了。觉得太难了，觉得大家都觉得很简单，我就觉得那么难，觉得很沮丧。作业快到 due date 了，第二个礼拜也过去了，还没有解决这个问题。我就很着急了，我觉得大一还学不好，以后就更困难了。我就想，不能够这样，要不要去问老师？我就很害羞不敢去问，挣扎了很久，到第三周终于还是去问了老师。我说老师啊，这个 textbook 一点都不简单。作为一个中国学生，又刚刚来，我就把我的想法跟老师说了，老师人很好，说他很理解我的情况，然后就给我讲了应该怎么怎么去学。然后他说，这种学习上更多的是看个人性格和习惯。我后来学会了每次写作业就把笔记拿出来，把书翻开，直接看重点了，效率高了很多，后来就觉得这是一门挺轻松的课。

Translation: After the first week of class, I spent the entire Sunday in my uncle's house. They went out for fun, but I stayed at home. I spent a good half an hour on the first page and I didn't understand many words. I didn't want to continue. It was too difficult. Knowing that others find it so easy but I find it so difficult, I

was very frustrated. The assignment due date was approaching and the second week passed by. I still hadn't solved the problem. I grew more worried and anxious. I thought, if I didn't do well in freshman year, it would be more difficult in the future. I thought to myself, no, I can't do it. Should I go to ask the professor for help? I struggled a lot because I was too shy. As a newly arrived Chinese student, I shared my thought with the professor. He was very nice and understanding of my situation. He then gave me advice on how to learn. He then told me learning strategies vary depending on personality and habit. Since then, I learned to study with my notes. I read the textbook with study guide and key concepts. It was much more efficient and later I found this a very fun and easy class. (Dani, interview#1, 3/7/14, original answer in Chinese)

Dani told me that before she sought help from the professor, she was looking up every single new word in the textbook and it was not helpful or efficient. She felt very depressed and incapable. She did not want to share with her classmates because she thought they would not understand her challenges. Although it took her some extra courage to approach the professor, the conversation with the professor had a profound impact on her. She said, “老师人很好，还说你以后每次交作业前可以把作业拿给我看一下，我可以告诉你哪个是对的，哪个是错的。然后你如果来不及写笔记，可以随时来找我。 Translation: The professor was very nice. He even said to me, you may show your assignment to me before submission in the future. I can tell you which ones are right and which ones are wrong. If you miss some notes in class, you can always come to me” (Dani, interview#1, 3/7/14, original answer in Chinese). Since then, she not

only did well in her Psychology class but also developed effective strategies to apply to other subjects. As the only Chinese student in her class, she was proud to receive GPA3.5 at the end of the semester and she credited the progress to her experience of grappling with the first Psychology textbook.

In Dani's case, she had the same textbook but her interaction with the textbook was mediated by her conversation with the professor. She began with reading the textbook and feeling frustrated with the overwhelming information and excessive new vocabulary. Then she asked her professor for help. Her professor's advice not only changed her interacting with the textbook but also changed her views of the class. After talking with the professor, she adapted her approach to the textbook from bottom-up (starting with looking up every new word) to top-down (starting with understanding the major concepts and ideas). She not only discovered her own way of using the textbook more effectively for her exams, but also felt more confident about her capability and learning strategy. It exemplifies how materials mediate learning, and how knowledge is constructed and transformed from interaction with external world to internal world.

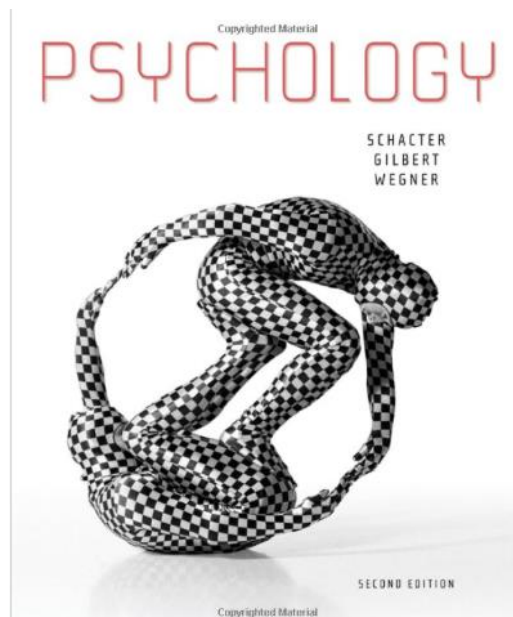


Figure 10: Dani's tool: *Psychology*

In comparing Ben's and Dani's mediated learning, I see both experiences sharing a common theme: a tool and interaction with the tool mediated their learning, the novel *The Scarlet Letter* for the former and the psychology textbook for the latter. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), within sociocultural theory, artifacts can be simultaneously materials and symbolic aspects that direct human activities and make change with both the external and internal world. These two books became momentous artifacts in their study and to their life as a person. In Ben's story, *Scarlet Letter* was a significant artifact that helped him to understand the novel itself; more importantly to help him adapt to the U.S. learning culture and establish his confidence as an international student. Similarly, in Dani's case, learning how to approach the textbook differently brought her different outcomes. According to Dani, she not only performed better in her assignments and exams, but also felt more comfortable with this subject and successfully applied the learning strategies to other subjects.

These two students' mediated learning was also reflected through a more complex interaction network between them and the artifacts, and between them and the professors. A similar story was told by Swain and her colleagues to elucidate the complexities of mediation (Swain et al., 2010). In their research, the focal participant Mona was born in China in the 1950s with few resources to learn English, but one of the powerful mediational tools for her was a grammar book and the interaction with her father who directed her how to use the book. Mona preferred learning for communication to learning for grammar. However, at age 17, in order to pass her qualifying exam to be an English teacher, Mona had to study the grammar book and received tutoring from her father who learned some English. Mastering the grammar knowledge with her father's guidance helped her pass the exam and get the job offer. In this aspect, the grammar book served as a tool for her to change her place in the external world—becoming an English teacher—and her future choices to continue learning English. This book and her father's own belief in English learning provided *affordances* (Swain et al., 2010, p. 2), meaning opportunities and environment for potential learning for Mona. After she got the job and learned more grammar accuracy, she developed more faith in herself and continuously shaped her career goal. In the end, she received her doctoral degree in Applied Linguistics in Canada and established her career identity as a successful English teacher. The grammar book, combined with her father's guidance mediated her language learning and became shaped her professional trajectory.

Back to Ben and Dani's stories, their data echoed Swain et al.'s (2010) findings that "[t]he nature of the artifact, the nature of each person's interaction with the artifact,

and where, when and with whom this interaction takes place will determine how useful it will be as mediational tool (Swain et al., 2010, p. 9). Both Ben's interaction with Mrs. Kotty and Dani's interaction with her psychology professor took place at an earlier and important stage of their academic life, first year of Ben's high school in Chicago and Dani's first undergraduate semester in college. If Mrs. Kotty did not give the simplified version of the book to Ben, and if Dani failed to take the first step to seek help from her professor, mediation may not have happened and they may continue to feel frustrated in their overseas study and towards themselves. The network of mediation is intricate and reciprocal (bidirectional).

it provides the connection between culture and individuals. Bidirectional (reciprocal) relationships represent the way in which individuals and cultural artifacts continuously develop. (Swain et al., 2010, p. 9)

In other words, individuals' interaction with other people is mediated by materials; and sense-making of the materials is also mediated by interaction with others. *The Scarlet Letter* and the psychology textbook are culturally created artifacts: the former explores legalism, sin and guilt in an American historical setting; the latter displays western reasoning and logical thinking in the field of psychology. These materials connected Ben and Dani with further communication with their teachers, and their teachers facilitated their understanding of the materials. They used these materials to change their participation in the class discussion and exams, and then changed themselves by becoming more confident in the study abroad contexts.

4.4. Mediation and agency

In this section, three categories of mediational tools have been discussed: concrete materials, online resources and significant artifacts. It is important to remember that in most cases, participants adopted multiple tools to mediate learning, and the application of tools often involved interaction with other people. Participants in this study utilized their *agency* to mediate their learning with the help of these resources.

Agency is addressed in contemporary studies in psychology. Wertsch raises the fundamental assumption in his psychological theories about agency as “a property of the individual” (Wertsch, Tulviste & Hagstrom, 1996, p. 336). He and his coauthors consider the claim that “perception, memory, and cognition cannot be understood without taking into account the active, and often purposeful agent” as reflecting the basic assumptions about agency (Wertsch et al., 1996, p. 336).

Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspectives of agency echoed and expanded the psychological notion to indicate that agency extends *beyond the skin* through mediational means such as language (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) held that agency existed at the intermental and intramental plane of functioning, meaning that agency directs individuals action at the social interactional level first and then transmits to intrapersonal level. In other words, agency not only refers to an individual’s mindset but also is reflected through action. Wertsch and others synthesized Vygotsky’s explanations of agency, and took a step further to argue that:

An essential property of mediational means is that they are inherently tied to historical, cultural, and institutional settings. It follows, then, that the analysis of

agency takes us beyond intermental, or social interactional processes. It must be tied to a broader sociocultural milieu. (Wertsch et al., 1996, p. 337)

Studying agency cannot separate the relationship between psychological and sociocultural processes.

Without participants taking up the active role as an agent, the materials are still objects that are not mediating any learning. This active role extended beyond their minds and directed their actions. For example, if Dani was not agentic in her mind to seek change in her study struggle, she would not have made the agentic move to ask professors for help, the psychology textbook would be a reminder of her failure in exam and lack of learning abilities. Her action of asking for help turned the textbook into a reminder of her competence in learning and triumph on overcoming academic challenges. Similarly, in the excerpt of Dani's grammar learning via WhatsApp, she did not start the message conversation about grammar. Instead, she was confiding in her friend the unsatisfactory scores in her exam. However, when her friend corrected her grammatical errors, Dani was agentic in mind to clarify her grammar confusion and agentic in action to ask more meta-linguistic questions, so the conversation has turned into a grammar tutoring. Her agency successfully created a learning opportunity for herself.

Wertsch and his associates suggest that, "the agency is viewed as being an irreducible aggregate of individual (or individuals in intermental functioning) together with mediational means" (1996, p. 341). Wertsch and colleagues (1996) created the term *mediated agency*, also known as *individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means*, to indicate the origin and structure of mental processes. They argue that because

mediational means need to be appropriated by people to create impact on behaviors, “it is not individuals, but individuals-operating-with-mediational-means, who define the basic unit of agency” (p. 352). In the data presented above, learning is achieved through participants operating with mediational means, including textbooks, newspapers, puzzles, dictionaries, websites, TV shows, English subtitles, novels and so forth. Their interaction with the mediational means created an impact on their behaviors in class discussion, in exam preparations, in daily conversations with peers and in their learning styles and strategies.

Chapter 5 Mediated Learning through Semiotic Means and Other People

In this chapter, I will analyze how participants report using semiotic means, including language, signs and systems to mediate learning. The discussion will involve two major sociocultural concepts: language as a tool for mediation, and ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). Although each excerpt will be discussed with a focus on either language or ZPD, or their interconnectedness, it is worth mentioning that the excerpts displayed below contain rich information in the realm of sociocultural theory and can be analyzed from more than one perspective.

5.1. Language as mediational means

There is a variety of symbolic tools, or semiotic tools, but language is regarded in Vygotskian perspectives as the most powerful culturally constructed tool for mediation (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Joerchel (2013) also holds that language plays a complicated role not only in conveying information, but also in connecting and transforming the psychological system and societal processes. Four excerpts are displayed below to show how language is used and functioned in various ways as a tool to mediate participants' learning in literacy and shaping behaviors.

Jian: private speech

Jian's English is among the weakest of the participants in this study, but he is the one who insisted on speaking English in both interviews and the focus group. Jian was aware of his own English limitation, so he often talked to himself either to encourage

himself to be more risk-taking to speak English or to correct his own mistakes. When he visited England as a tourist at 18, he encouraged himself to be brave to communicate and solve the problems.

I was worried about the language problem. People cannot understand me. There will be some misunderstanding. I was even worried about, if people cannot understand me, how can I check in to the hotel? Or buy the tickets to where I want. But actually just a few minutes later, I think if they cannot understand me, I have gesture language. (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English)

The self-encouragement worked and he told about using simple language and gestures to successfully purchase a ticket from London to Manchester.

When I am in this situation, I just use very very simple language and vocabulary. Just like one day when I went to the train station, I wanted to buy a train ticket from London to Manchester, they told me very very complicated schedule, if you miss the train, you can't make up for the tickets or something else. I couldn't fully understand. I just told them where I want to go, Manchester. It's very simple, but it's very useful. (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English)

Jian is also a vigilant language learner. He said that he notices others' language use and correct his own mistakes. During our interviews, he would occasionally correct his own mistakes and he seemed satisfied learning this way, as shown in the following quote:

Sometimes I make mistakes not because I can't recognize it, but it is a bad hobby, habit. Every time it arises again, I will tell myself-never speak it again...It is

really simple mistake. Sometimes when I say single person, I will use have. This mistakes arise. Oh I make the mistake again. I used s. it should be this mistake.

(Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English)

Jian admitted that when he was with other Chinese students, as much as he wanted to practice his English, it was awkward and it required extra courage to initiate English conversation. In order to create more opportunities to be with English speakers, he purposefully chose Physics class, not a very commonly selected class by other Chinese students, as he stated, “If you choose your class with not so many people from your homeland, you have no opportunity to speak the native language with them. You are forced to speak English with them” (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English). *Forced* here is used in a positive way by Jian to refer to the environment that inspires exclusively English speaking. He firmly believed creating opportunities to speak English and correcting mistakes as they are observed are useful ways to improve English. He imagined that hosting parties with English speaking people would be an ideal way to speak English, but he would not invite too many Chinese people, otherwise it would become a Chinese-speaking party. He said he would consider hosting these English-speaking parties in the future.

Shan: “但是后来我觉得这样不行，我不能老是靠别人 Translation: Then later I realized this would not work. I cannot always rely on others” (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese)

Compared with other participants, Shan had more challenges in English learning both in academic setting and daily life, but she demonstrated an exceptionally motivated and positive attitude towards her study in the U.S. During the first half of the semester in the ELP program, she felt extremely frustrated because she could not understand the teacher in class, more so when she did not even know her name being called in class.

有时候 David 会叫我站起来回答问题，叫我的名字，我就很恍惚，我不知道他叫我。我不知道怎么回答，我也听不懂什么问题。我觉得特别囧，特别难堪...当时特别囧，下课后我就坐在那感觉很自责。没有哭过，但是很难受。我当时就说，我为什么要来这，要这么难看。我在国内可以学得好好的，为什么要在这里搞到自己那么难堪，连老师叫我我都听不懂，我也不知道该怎么回答问题。 Translation: Sometimes David [her instructor] called me to answer questions, calling my name. I was very confused. I didn't know he was calling me. I didn't know how to answer the question. I couldn't understand the question. I sat extremely embarrassed...particularly embarrassed at that time. After class, I sat there blaming myself. I didn't cry but felt really bad. I said to myself, why do I come here, to embarrass myself. I could have studied very well in China; why did I make myself so embarrassed here? I couldn't even understand my name being called, nor did I know the answer to the question. (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese)

However, she constantly reminded herself of the goal of coming to study in the US and recollected herself to be more patient and be brave to try, “我自己想去尝试。 Translation: I would like to try myself” (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese) , and “

但是后来我觉得这样不行，我不能老是靠别人。 Translate: Then later I realized this would not work. I cannot always rely on others” (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese).

Shan not only talked to herself but also talked to her friends during difficult times. She reported that there was some strange dynamic among her cohort in the China-Minnesota exchange program. Some students came from wealthy families and their goal of study abroad was only to pass the test, while she was determined to learn well and achieve a high score. While she was diligent in her study, she sometimes received either sarcastic comments questioning her competitiveness or comments intimidating her English proficiency from other Chinese students in her cohort. Under this circumstance, Shan often talked to her friend who was in the same situation,

我和另外一个经常在图书馆学习的同学说，你要知道咱们的目标和他们（学习态度不好的同学）的目标不一样。你要知道我们是要转学的，咱们是来学习的，咱们不是追究及格就及格了，你不要忘了我们在国内来美国前许下的目标壮志...我们一定要学习，咱们和他们不一样。咱们如果学不好，就要延期毕业了，性价比就不高了。 Translation: I said to the other friend who also often studies in the library, you need to know that our goals are different from theirs (referring to those who made mean comments). You need to know we are here to transfer. We are here to learn. We are not pursuing a pass. Don't forget our ambitious goals before coming to the United States.... We have to study. We are not the same as them. If we don't study well, it will delay our transfer, and the cost is higher. (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese)

Shan started her study abroad with strong resilience on other classmates to help her translate in daily life and in class, but she kept reminding herself to be independent. Her words supported her and others to endure hardship from study and from other cohort; her self-speech reminded her of her goals and strengthened her investment to study harder for academic achievement. Her agency extended beyond her mind to apply in action and influenced her choices in her study. By the end of the semester, she reported her improvement and stronger confidence towards her future study.

5.1.1. Language to mediate learning

How did language mediate Jian and Shan's learning reflected in the excerpts above? These two participants' stories exhibit the application of private speech to advance L2 learning and direct human behavior in study abroad. "Private speech is speech addressed to the self. It is intrapersonal communication that mediates thinking process; that is, it is a cognitive tool that helps to structure and organize our own thinking" (Swain et. al, 2010, p. 36). To start with, when Jian arrived in England, his concern of language barriers was reflected on his dialogue with himself, "if people cannot understand me, how can I check in to the hotel? Or buy the tickets to where I want" (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English). His self-talking actually appeared quite often, according to his report, but he then would use the same way—talking to himself—to decrease the anxiety, "If they cannot understand me, I have gesture language" (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English). He addressed to himself when he was nervous; he also addressed himself to find solutions for problems. The power of his

private speech lies in helping Jian to predict possible challenges, to organize thoughts and to seek solutions.

According to Vygotsky, language is the most important semiotic sign to mediate learning. Vygotsky (1978, p. 28) says, “Signs and words serve children first and foremost as a means of social contact with other people”. Talking to self is often discussed in sociocultural perspectives. Vygotsky calls it inner speech, meaning through participation in activities, learners talk to self, transform self-speech into psychological tools to direct behavior. Other sociocultural theorists have generated different labels and developed the concepts in different ways, such as *self-directed speech* (Vygotsky, 1978); *speech for the self* (Lantolf, 2000; Lee, 2008), and *interpersonal communication* (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Despite the different labels and different nuances, one shared characteristic is that language is deployed to regulate mental and physical activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Language is considered as mediational tool and mediated action. Closely related to language is another concept *linguaging*. Linguaging was originally raised by Lado (1979, cited in Swain, 2006) as a general term to refer to various use of language globally. However, Swain adopted and defined the term differently. She used the term linguaging to “refer to *producing* language, and, in particular, to producing language in an attempt to understand-to problem-solve-to make meaning” (Swain, 2006, p. 96; italics in original). Linguaging is used to explain both types of language, collaborative dialogue and private speech. Scholars believe that linguaging has the intellectual function to assist learners to “solve difficult problems, to impede impulsive behavior, to plan, to focus attention, in sum, to master one’s own behavior. Linguaging mediates these cognitive

(intellectual, higher mental) processes” (Swain et al., 2010, p. 43). In both Jian’s and Shan’s case, their speech with self took on the intellectual function and thus became languaging because this private speech supported them going through challenges: Jian established confidence and used simple gestures to solve problems. When Shan was sitting at the corner after class and blaming herself for not understanding her name called, she had the thought of going back to China. She said to herself “我当时就说，我为什么要来这，要这么难看。我在国内可以学得好好的，为什么要在这里搞到自己那么难堪。 Translation: I said to myself, why do I come here, to embarrass myself. I could have studied very well in China; why did I make myself so embarrassed here?” (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese). In this situation, she could have withdrawn from the program and gone back to China, which is not uncommon in the China-Minnesota program. However, languaging impeded her impulsive behavior. She always reminded herself of the purpose of studying the U.S., and the power of languaging helped her plan and refocus her attention to study. These two cases demonstrate that languaging has the intellectual function to help both Jian and Shan master their behaviors. In the process of mastering and adapting their behavior, they have achieved higher mental processes, such as analyzing situations, problem-solving skills and managing academic crisis.

On the surface, participants are talking to themselves; however, this private speech does not come from individuals. On the contrary, private speech has its origin from social speech and interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). For instance, Jian noticed his own grammatical errors partly from noticing native speakers’ talking and

partly from being corrected by people around him. The fact that he always insisted in speaking English may lead to more opportunities for him to notice the gap between his English expressions and that from native speakers. Then he developed the stronger meta-linguistic awareness, which enabled him to correct himself. Similarly, Shan's self-motivational speech was also derived from the negative comments from her cohort. Swain believes that "These two activities—talking with others and talking with the self—are connected theoretically and in practice" (Swain et al, 2010, p. 34). It is the interaction and conversation in a social and cultural environment that leads to participants' dialogue with self.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that, as we bounce ideas around with others and talk to ourselves, sometime it is thorny to distinguish the intricate connection between talking with self and talking with others. "The boundaries between social speech and speech for the self are often blurred, and what looks like collaborative dialogue may on closer inspection also be considered as speech for the self" (Swain et al., 2010, p. 34). Take Shan's conversation with her friend for example. When she and her friend were struggling between diligent study and mocking comments from other cohort, Shan felt tremendous pressure, as she stated, "因为到了美国，一方面自己思想可能有改变，另一方面受身边的人的影响真是太大了。这个影响真的非常非常大，非常厉害。 Translation: Because we are in the U.S., partly because my own thinking has gone through some changes, and partly because others' influence is really huge. This influence is very very huge and severe" (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese). She said that every time she studied for a vocabulary test, her cohort would mock her for

showing off her diligence. At this time, she would contemplate two things: “1.难道他们真的都懂？但是有的单词我真的不会。2.要是在国内，每次考试我都复习啊，我觉得这是态度问题啊。 Translation: 1. Do they really understand? But I really don't understand some vocabulary. 2. If I were in China now, I would still review for each test. I think it is a matter of learning attitude” (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese). This pressure has pushed her and other students in similar situation to a dilemma: to hang out with others to gain popularity but fail in test, or to get a good score but lose friendship. As mentioned above, her private speech adjusted her behaviors and reinforced her determination for academic achievement, so she conducted a conversation to encourage her friend. In her talk with the friend, she used 咱们 five times and 我们 three times, both meaning *we*. Mercer (2000) pointed out, people use language for “thinking together, for collectively making sense of experience and solving problems” (p. 1). Shan used her language to engage her friends to think together, to make sense of their similar experience together and to seek solutions for the difficult situation collectively. In this regard, this talk allowed Shan to seek empathy from her friends and receive emotional support. Languaging became “a form of shared cognition” for her and her friends (Swain et al., 2010, p. 43). What's fascinating is that this talk looks like a collaborative dialogue, but under closer inspection, it is also like a speech to self. She was talking to herself in the meanwhile, emphasizing the goal of study abroad and intensifying her determination. Scholars argue that there is a close link between speech for the self and speech for the others, and this very permeable process is a manifestation of higher mental functioning (Swain et al., 2010, p. 37). Shan's multiple speech, both for

herself and for others, effectively guided her out of the dilemma, reoriented her direction and adapted her behavior in the environment.

5.1.2. Cultured language and systems to mediate learning

Jian: Jimmy Kimmel Live!

One of the most memorable and informing stories about Jian is his sense making of the recent global outrage over a popular American talk show called *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* produced by ABC. In October 2013, during the regular Kids Table section in the *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, the TV show host Jimmy Kimmel was engaging a group of 5 to 6 year-old kids to talk about the United States' government debts, much of which is held by China. One boy said, "Shoot cannons all the way over and kill everyone in China", and Jimmy's response was "Kill everyone in China? OK, that's an interesting idea". The airing of this short clip aroused hundreds of protests both within the U.S. and China, over 100,000 signatures were gathered in petition to the White House; and the Chinese government spokesperson demanded an apology. In the end, ABC issued a formal apology and promised to permanently cancel the Kids Table section in the show, Jimmy Kimmel made multiple formal apologies at various capacities, and the White House publicized a formal response to the petition.

What upset Chinese people was not only the airing of this clip but also Jimmy's response with the word *interesting*. In our interview, Jian cited this news to explain how he understood cultural connotation in language and how language could lead to misunderstanding.

Actually I know that ABC, Jimmy apologized after this program. As Jimmy himself, he didn't show very specific attitude of himself towards what to do on this problem. After the child said killing all Chinese, Jimmy's reaction was 'oh interesting!' ...interesting, in American way, this is kind of like 'oh idiot'. It contains some of irony. His true meaning is that your opinion is a bit ridiculous... Yes, that is the cultural difference because generally Chinese people will take that 'interesting' as kind of encouragement not the irony. That's why brings out the misunderstanding and conflict. (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in English)

Jian stated that, on one hand, he understood Jimmy's disapproval of the child's opinion to kill all Chinese by using the word *interesting* to respond; on the other hand, as a Chinese, he could not avoid feeling upset with the child's words as he thought the child's opinion reflected the overall impression of American people.



Figure 11: Photo of demonstration against Jimmy Kimmel Live!



Figure 12: Jimmy Kimmel made an apology on the TV show

Jian's story is very telling in light of different cultural connotations of the same word. It is true that the word *interesting* has positive connotation in Chinese language and if someone responds with the word *interesting*, it can indicate agreement and encouragement for further elaboration. However, *interesting* does not necessarily associate with approval in English language. Unfortunately, not every English learner can distinguish these lexical nuances, which partly accounts for the conflict regarding Jimmy Kimmel's TV show. This is an informative excerpt because Jian adopted the language used in *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* to analyze cultural differences and to deepen his language and cultural understanding. He understands that language is cultured. Language is an action to display one's attitude. Jimmy Kimmel used the word *interesting* to share his attitude but that was not how Chinese people comprehend. In this aspect, Jian showed empathy and negotiated his emotion outrage towards this crisis.

On the other hand, his own cultural meaning of *interesting* was affecting his reasoning of the situation. When discussing language, sociocultural approaches do not

isolate words from their actual use in real-life. It is meaningless to discuss that individuals have a sign “without addressing the ways in which they do or do not use it to mediate their own actions or those of others” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 29). Vygotsky explained that all means, including language, are socioculturally situated; therefore, speakers’ voices need to be placed within the individuals’ social, cultural and historical contexts for discussion. Regardless of the fact that he could objectively diagnose the problem of the TV show conflict, but as a Chinese, from a more collective value-laden culture, he was offended by the child’s comment. There was a conflict not only in communication between Chinese and Americans here, but also conflict within himself. Admittedly, Jian may still feel hurt from *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, but his conversation did reveal a mediation leading to a higher mental process. Vygotsky states that “the dialectical unity” of the practical intelligence and sign use in the human adults “is the very essence of complex human behavior” (1978, p. 24). Language was the sign used in this case, and Jian discussed and reasoned through dialogue with himself; these two systems collectively led him to achieve higher analytical views on this TV show crisis.

Ben: Email system and rubric system to mediate his learning to be professional

After two years of high school education in Chicago, Ben has developed impressive English proficiency and an American accent. Although he said that he had no problem communicating in academic settings and daily life, he pointed out the desire to learn some short phrases popularly used by Americans. Also, because of his clear goal to learn the professional side of America, meaning how to do things professionally in

American classroom and society, he stressed the need and his endeavors to learn to act the same way as professional Americans.

Below is his understanding of the email system in relation to American professional world.

Gradually I felt that most of the communication in the US professional fields come from emails. Email is such an important element in the professional field that you have to know how to write emails...Emails have a lot of types...It depends on the people who you address the emails to...To whom it concern. I don't use much but I know. It is professional email but you don't have to be so strict...I think it's just the end that you have to play on them. So for you, emails if I want to ask something, I will say thank you. But if I am urgent for some answers, I will say 'I look forward to your answers' or 'I will follow up with two days'. If you want to emphasize something, you need to list it at the end because people always want to see who wrote this email to me, they will always focus on the last section, who you are, what's your role. The end is very important. (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English)

Ben gave me specific examples on how different he will write an email now that he has reflected on how they can be written professionally. If the email is sent to me, he will write it as a note and send it without proofreading because he sees me as his friend. Because he is an official in a student organization and a student assistant in the international office in University of Minnesota, if the email is intended for event collaboration, he will "have to introduce the program... inquire if they have interest in

collaborating with some events. So pretty much who we are first, what we do, um, how can you fit in and how can we collaborate” (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14)

During the email exchange experience, he learned the meaning of the abbreviation FYI and learned to use it.

Those small words, like the sayings...It is also the way you are speaking...Like FYI, For Your Information. But how many times are you going to use it? You probably see it a lot...Recently I learned to use it because someone forwarded me this email with FYI. I just forwarded to others with FYI...I was like, sort of in the culture. I learned it, not only through the way people used to me, but also used it to other people. It is just the professional example. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

This is an example to help answer the question: how are mediational signs used to mediate learning? When Ben firstly saw the acronym FYI, it was just a written language. However, Ben “*learned to use it*” and “*forwarded to others*” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14); this indicates his possible thinking process prior to applying the sign: what does this acronym mean? In what contexts should it be used? What would I gain if I used it in my email? His interaction with the acronym included observing, thinking, learning, and applying. Knowing how to use FYI shows his adaptation to the professional field in the U.S. culture and he felt that his English proficiency advanced to a higher level.

In addition to email system, the rubric system is another knowledge growth for Ben to better fit in the American academic setting. In the writing class observations, I noticed that Ben asked several questions about rubrics for the writing project. When

asked why he was concerned about the rubric, he responded, “That’s something I learn about American cultures. Even though it is a writing class, it is very subjective. The rubrics are very important. The teachers actually grade the papers according to the rubrics” (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English). He said that he was the type of person who cared about good grades and he has learned the importance of rubrics in a hard way in high school when he received a low grade because of missing points on the rubrics. After realizing the importance of rubrics, he has developed his own technique to use rubrics for a good grade. “I will do it in my own way and then check with the rubrics, but will not follow the rubrics to develop my writing. That will make things a lot more complicated” (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English). Ben felt that clear understanding of the grading system was an efficient way to adapt to American academic culture and achieve good grades.

Ben’s examples involve not spoken language but written language. *FYI* was used as a sign in emails to indicate information sharing. According to Vygotsky, “speech is an excellent example of sign usage” (p. 126). He believes that once this sign usage is internalized, it “becomes a pervasive and profound part of the higher psychological processes” (p. 126) and learners “become more efficient in their adaptive and problem-solving efforts” (p. 127). This can be seen in Ben’s experience with the use of *FYI*. Ben began from receiving emails with the phrase *FYI*, and he understood the meaning, but he has not reached the stage of using this phrase. In this case, language is a potential affordance but has not functioned as a mediational tool yet. When he decided to use the term with other people, this phrase *FYI* not only served his social communicative purpose

but also led to his understanding of how to use this acronym, and how the use of this sign can demonstrate this adaptation to the professional setting. Language at this time became a cognitive tool to mediate his learning. Similarly, when he noticed different styles of email writing, this written language is a potential tool for learning. However, he started to collect a repertoire of phrases such as *To whom it may concern*, and he learned to apply appropriate phrases for different emails intended for different people to achieve different purposes. In this situation, his action falls into Vygotsky's description, "as soon as speech and the use of signs are incorporated into any action, the action becomes transformed and organizes along entirely new lines" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 24). Ben integrated his written speech and the signs --appropriate phrases and endings in emails—into action, and this process adapted his behavior in the professional world of U.S. culture. Ben told me that after learning the importance of writing professional emails, he applied the professional skills in writing to the Dean of the International Office to thank her for the opportunity for a project and extended his interest in future opportunities. He said, "I was thinking should I reply to her email and I actually did. So I guess this is one of the ways that professionals would do, that is to maintain the relationship... These things are pretty important. I learn from my advisor sometimes and also from emails that I receive" (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English). He accumulated the understanding by reading others' emails and having direct scaffolding from his advisor, then he transformed the understanding into action. He may not receive any response from the Dean, but it is salient the emailing system in American professional field has mediated Ben's learning in a sociocultural environment. After he learned to use appropriate

language in communication, he felt more confident as a communicator and learner. His pride was captured in both his facial expressions but also in his comment, “I was like, sort of in the culture. I learned it, not only through the way people used to me, but also used it to other people...Sometimes you know the word, but if you know to use it, it is another level” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English).

His questioning about rubrics in class is also an indication of his mediated learning. It looks like he was just requesting clarification of assignments, but the action of questioning embodies with his understanding of the importance of a rubric system in many American academic setting. Swain and colleagues raise that caveat that “not all speaking or writing can be considered languaging—producing language to solve problems (Swain, 2006). Speaking and writing that is routine, that has the social function of passing along a simple message, of being friendly, of showing support, and so on, is not languaging because that language is not being used a cognitive tool to mediate thinking” (Swain et al., 2010, p. 43). The rubric system here is not languaging, but Ben’s questions are because the questions extend beyond functioning at the social level. It was Ben’s active agency to use the rubric system to mediate thinking and adapt his strategies for academic success. The rubric that the teacher in junior high school used was a tool but the tool did not cease in high school. The rubric system gradually became a sign to shape Ben’s understanding of American academic culture. The recognition of the important rubrics guided him to use rubrics as reference for writing. His approach was not to follow the rubric, but be sure to check the rubric before submitting the assignment. He now seemed more confident to write and he always wanted to have clear instructions from

teachers in class. He not only learned the importance of rubrics but also an aspect of Western academic culture.

Jian and Ben's cases are intriguing with respect to two topics: language and systems, including institutional and instructional systems in this case, are cultured, and are valuable tools for mediated learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), language is a powerful symbolic mediational means for learning, and language, like any other mediational tool, is culturally constituted. The connotation of language is cultured and the way of using the language is structured in a social and cultural context. When learners understand the culturally constructed meaning of the language, language assists in constructing knowledge and becomes a mediational tool to direct behavior and promote intellectual learning. Additionally, Vygotsky (1978) argues that individuals' "reflection and elaboration of experience takes place" by language, so language is "a highly personal and at the same time a profoundly social human process" (p. 126). It is true in both cases. To Jian, he held it personally to the connotation of the word *interesting*, but he also tried to convince himself to look at the meaning from another social perspective, the English connotation. To Ben, being able to use the proper phrases in emails and to work according to rubrics not only assisted his adaptation to various settings as an intercultural learner but also improved his social communication with others.

Vygotsky views the human's ability to consciously match appropriate language to appropriate settings as a signal of higher mental functioning. When language is used appropriately for certain purposes, its semiotic potentials (Wertsch, 1991) is achieved. Similar experience is also shared by other participants. Cheng has noticed various ways

to ask for interlocutor's repetition in different situations. Her teacher taught her "Pardon?" in class, and she heard people say "Sorry?" while traveling in Australia, but now she often hears "What's that?" in the United States (Cheng, interview#2, 5/7/14). Even though Cheng was aware that all of these phrases served her the same purpose, she was fascinated by the differing frequency of language use in different regions of the world. She said that studying abroad not only exposed her to more vernaculars, or more options of expressing meanings; but more importantly, it motivated her to adopt the more commonly used phrases in the matching country. Therefore, she liked to use "what's that?" more in the U.S. and that makes her feel good. The adapted ways of expression did enhance her confidence in a new environment. Jian also mentioned that learning to say "Stay warm!" is an indicator for his adjustment to the Midwest culture in the United States (Jian, interview#1, 3/4/14). Additionally, Shan recalled her first month when people greeted her "How are you doing?" and her only response was "Fine". She said that after observing how others responded to greetings, she also learned to respond "I'm good. How about you?" as a gesture of reciprocal greeting (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14). Language is a mediational tool for participants in various times and provides learning opportunities. No matter whether the participants learned from observing others' dialogues or learn from their own conversation with others, language use directed their higher mental processing to figure out the appropriate speech for appropriate occasions. Language and culture learning is achieved in this process.

5.2. ZPD in mediated learning

Human beings rely on a range of means to mediate their behavior and development; the mediational means include concrete material tools and symbolic signs and systems. When individuals use mediational tools, a ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) is formed, referring to

the distance between the actual development level as determined through independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

In the zone of proximal development, the more capable peer determines the learner's ZPD and provides assistance to enhance the learner's development, known as *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Scaffolding is a metaphor firstly used by Vygotsky and Luria (1994) to refer to adults assisting children to use tools and signs to solve present tasks. Since the 1970s, the notion of *scaffolding* has been widely adopted to describe co-constructed learning and eventual development with the assistance of an *expert* and mediating artifacts (Swain et al., 2010). Scaffolding is a prominent concept in ZPD. This assistance is attained through mediation from social sources, peers and self. In the context of this study, participants found assistance from English speaking U.S. born peers as well as bilingual Chinese peers.

Facilitated learning in ZPD emerged in interviews, document data and class observation in this study. All participants in this study have explicitly reported that interacting with their peers, cohort, professors or acquaintances have facilitated their language and cultural learning. One shared experience is that conversing with native

speakers offers an opportunity for them to learn colloquial phrases that they would never have known if they were studying alone, such as “Stay warm!” and “How’s it going?”. Native speakers would point out their mistakes in pronunciation and grammar. For instance, Dani said she would have never been able to distinguish *bitch* and *beach*, *shit* and *sheet*, if it were not for her American roommate’s help. Interacting with Chinese peers with higher English proficiency also provides opportunities for intellectual development and more advanced language learning. Shan reported that her Chinese classmates taught her to use alternative expressions to explain the same meaning, “她们能用一个我意想不到的特别简单的词去代替我想像中的特别复杂的词去交流。因为如果是我，我肯定会用一个特别复杂的词，中东同学有时就是听不懂，但他们用特别简单的词那他们就能听懂. Translation: They can use a surprisingly simple word to replace a very complicated word that I would have used. If it were me, I would use a particularly complicated word and sometimes my middle east classmates cannot understand, but my Chinese friends adopted a very simple word and they can understand” (Shan, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese). On the contrary, Ju appreciated her Vietnamese classmate Tam for modeling how to use a more sophisticated word. She said,“我学习她比较多吧，我觉得她英文比我好...她英文比较好点，用词可能会，可能写 essay，她用词会比较高级。。。motivation 这个词吧。之前我不知道这个词，如果我的话，我就会说 active，但是知道了这个词以后就可以去用它. Translation: I learned from her more often. I think her English is better than mine...Her English is better and she can use, when writing essays, her word choice is more sophisticated...like the word motivation. I didn’t know this word, and if it were me, I

would use the word active, but after learning this word, I can use it in the future” (Ju, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in Chinese). Sociocultural theorists hold that “human mental activity is rooted in the discursive practices of the community. In particular, the development of higher forms of thinking and the acquisition of certain complex skills are thought to be initiated and shaped by social interaction” (Guerrero & Villamil, 2002, p. 52). Participants interact with others in their study abroad contexts; their discursive practices with both native English speakers and other more advanced English learners provide affordances to mediate their language learning.

In this section, I will focus on several excerpts from multiple participants to illustrate how ZPD was created in a network of interaction, namely between peers, between professors and students and within selves. I will also show how this interaction-based ZPD facilitates production of many sorts beyond what is possible for the participant independently.

5.2.1. ZPD between peers

Dani: Quinn, Nichole and WhatsApp

Dani repeatedly expressed her gratitude of having many professors and classmates in Anderson College to lend her support in study; two of them were Quinn, her classmate in Microeconomics class, and Nichole, her tutee in her Statistics class. After sharing data of her self-report, I will explain how Dani played both an expert role and novice role in different episodes but both led to her intellectual development.

I observed in Dani's Microeconomics class that she always sat next to this curly haired young man, and her face lit up when talking about him—Quinn. Dani said Quinn was an excellent student and always offered to help her with assignments and test preparation. At first she was too shy to accept this study buddy, but then she decided to study together with Quinn. Here is Dani's recollection of one study time,

我跟 Quinn 学习的时候一般都是他跟我讲，因为我有好多概念性的东西不太懂，需要很多解释，他每次都解释得很清楚，比老师还清楚。而且每次都要 make sure 你 understand 了。第一次我不好意思，大家都很累，到晚上 8 点多 9 点了，我就不好意思再问他，就说没有问题了。他就说你确定没有问题了，我说没问题了。他问了我三遍确定没有问题了，我说没有。然后他说，那你给我解释一下这个题，如果你能解决出来那就没有问题了。那我真的不太会，然后我说，我看大家都很累，不想耽误你时间，但是他说，没事，所以我们就继续学了。 Translation: When I study with Quinn, he always talks more because I don't understand many concepts and he can explain clearly to me, even more clearly than the professor, and he always made sure I have understood. Then the first time when we studied together, it was almost 9pm at night and I saw both of us were tired, so I said I already understood. He asked me, are you sure you have no questions? I said I was sure. He asked me three times to confirm I had no questions. Then he said, please explain this question for me. If you can solve this problem, then I truly believe that you already understood. I actually didn't understand so I told him the truth that I didn't want to take too much of his time.

He said no worries and we continued to study. (Dani, interview#2, 5/7/14, original answer in English)

When she was studying with Quinn for the Microeconomics class, apparently she was playing the novice role because Quinn assisted her with many concepts. Learning involved both subject matter and language matter.

Different from the professor who taught the whole class, Quinn sat next to Dani in almost every class, which allowed him to gather a better sense of Dani's language proficiency. Therefore, he could use the language that Dani could understand to explain the concepts, which may be why Dani found Quinn's explanation clear, and even clearer than the professor's. Quinn not only provided clear explanation, but also repeatedly confirmed that Dani understood. When he noticed that Dani might pretend to understand, he requested her to show him how to solve the problem in the study guide. Guerro and Villamil (2002) explain the process of scaffolding simply to be when a peer or tutor is able to "help someone less skilled solve a problem" (p. 52). Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) accentuated the crucial importance of tutorial interaction in fostering learning. According to them, scaffolding can take place if the tutor demonstrates the following characteristics through their interaction: recruiting the tutee's attention, making the tasks manageable, making sure they are progressing toward the goals, marking critical features, controlling frustration and modeling solutions (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). If we examine Quinn's performance against these characteristics, it is safe to say that scaffolding takes place. Quinn successfully attracted Dani's attention and made the task manageable through clear and comprehensible explanation of abstract concepts; Quinn

was constantly making sure Dani understood the content, and he would not be convinced until Dani showed him how to solve the problem by herself. Even though L2 acquisition is not explicitly recorded here, it is salient that Dani's subject knowledge is improved with Quinn's tutorial and that Dani learns through interaction in English. During the process of understanding the concepts and understanding Quinn, Dani's English proficiency surely must have been enhanced along the way.

Another study buddy for her was Nichole, her tutee in the Statistics class. Dani was strong in Statistics so she was hired as a tutor. She and Nichole became good friends and she reported that Nichole has helped her a lot as a native speaker, “她帮我学英文比较多, 我们后来就一起学习准备考试, 复习期间有个 break, 就会聊天, 这样对于口语和听力比较有帮助。一般发音她都会纠正我。在我帮助她的时候我就相当于 refresh 一次了。 Translation: She helped me more with my English. When we studied for exams together, we sometimes took a break during study and chatted. It was very helpful with my speaking and listening. Usually she would correct my pronunciation, and when I helped her, it was like a chance for me to refresh my knowledge” (Dani, interview#2, 5/7/14, original answer in Chinese). Dani's intellectual growth also emerged in her conversation with Nichole. During their interaction, Dani started with the expert role because she was tutoring Nichole. However, she benefited from this interaction at two levels: the first benefit lies in that Nichole's English is valuable to Dani's listening comprehension and speaking practice. Dani has maximal English exposure when conversing with Nichole. If the first benefit gives Dani optimal input of English, the second benefit allows Dani to constantly produce English in speaking and writing. Dani

reported that in order to help Nichole understand Statistics, she practiced explaining the concepts and problem solving in English before actual tutoring. This preparation process offered multiple opportunities for Dani to review content knowledge and practice English.

Dani's English language improvement is more noticeable in the previously discussed episode of WhatsApp messaging with her Thai friend Chawit. She confided to her Thai friend Chawit the difficulty in reading, but Chawit noticed and pointed out a grammar error in her message. The conversation thus developed to discussing adjectives conjugations and verb tense. Dani offered me a set of screen shots of the original WhatsApp messaging and these screen shots documented an invisible mediated learning process (Figure 13-20). The texts in the white box are from Chawit and the texts in green box are from Dani.

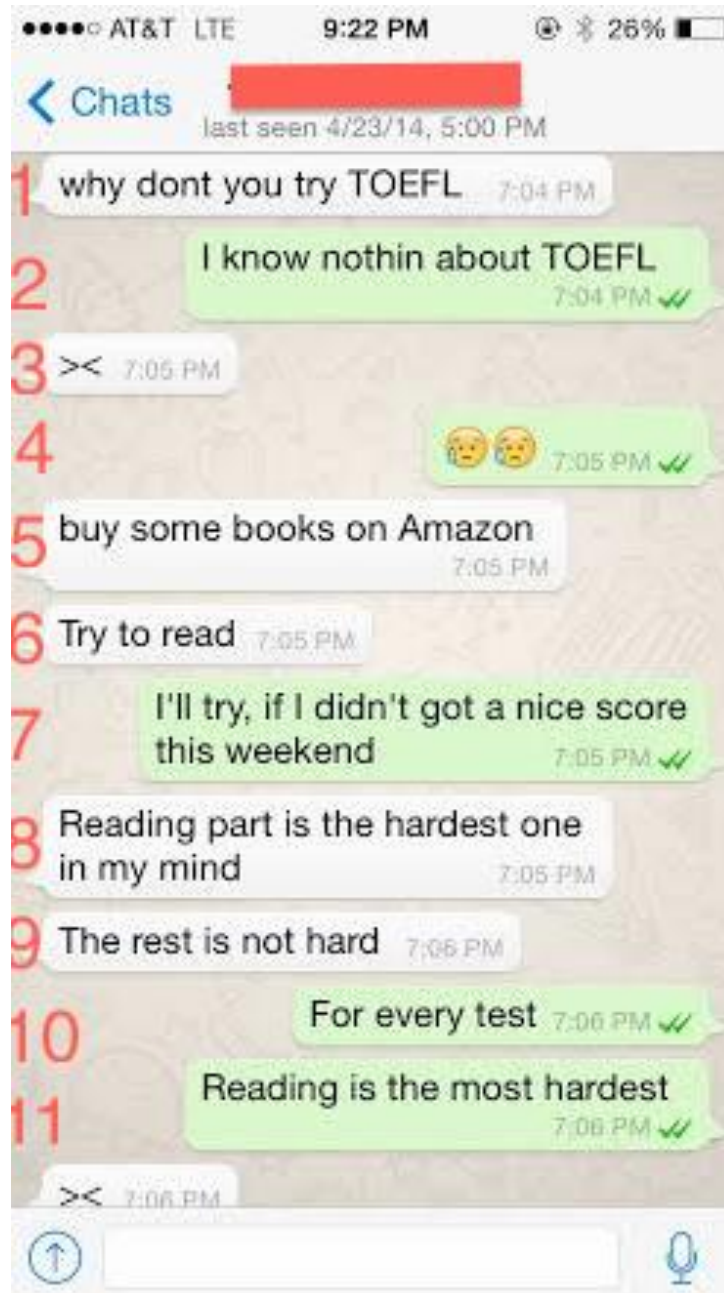


Figure 13: WhatsApp message-part 1 screen shot taken by the participant



Figure 14: WhatsApp message-part 2 screen shot taken by the participant



Figure 15: WhatsApp message-part 3 screen shot taken by the participant



Figure 16: WhatsApp message-part 4 screen shot taken by the participant

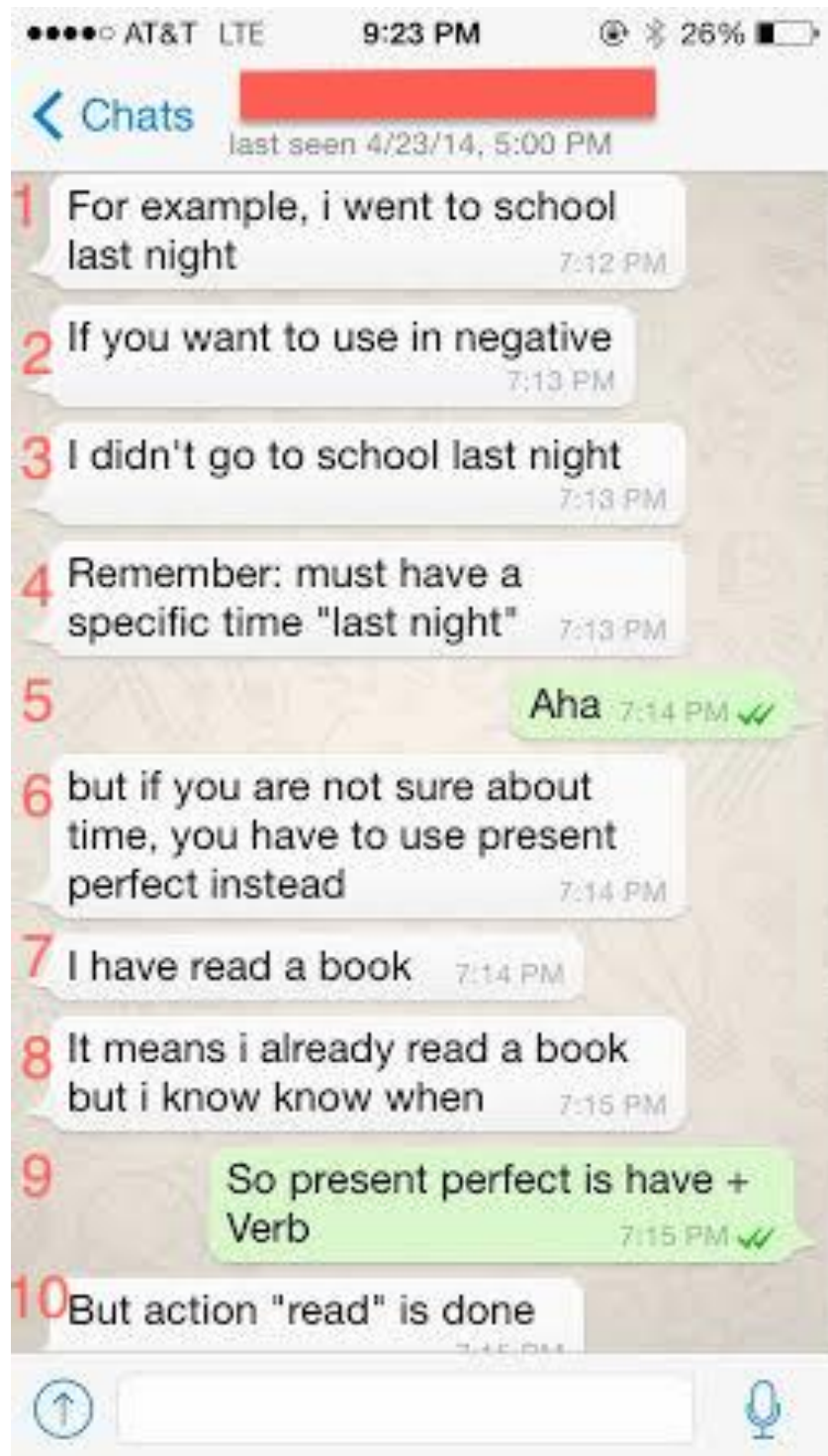


Figure 17: WhatsApp message-part 5 screen shot taken by the participant

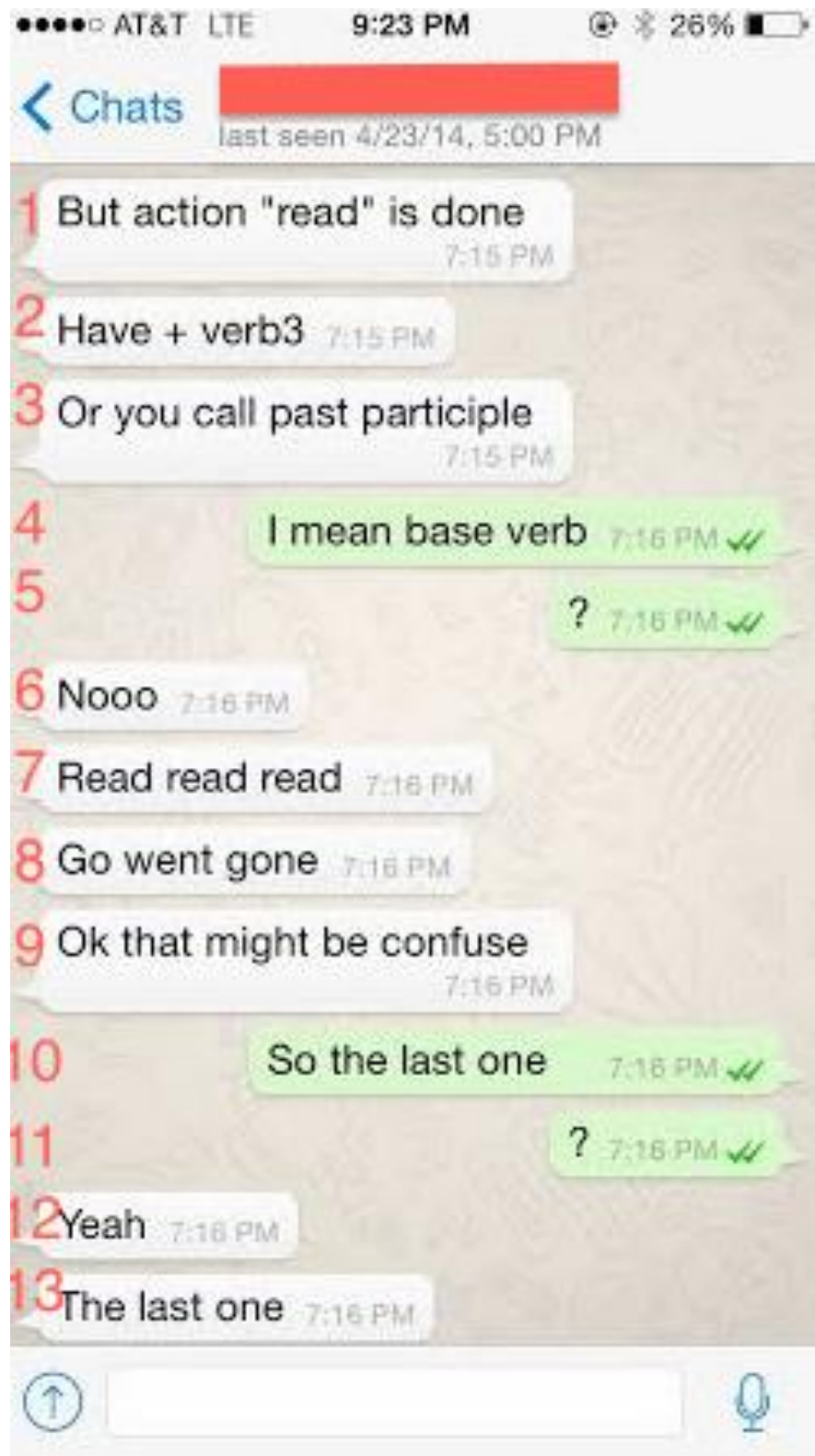


Figure 18: WhatsApp message-part 6 screen shot taken by the participant
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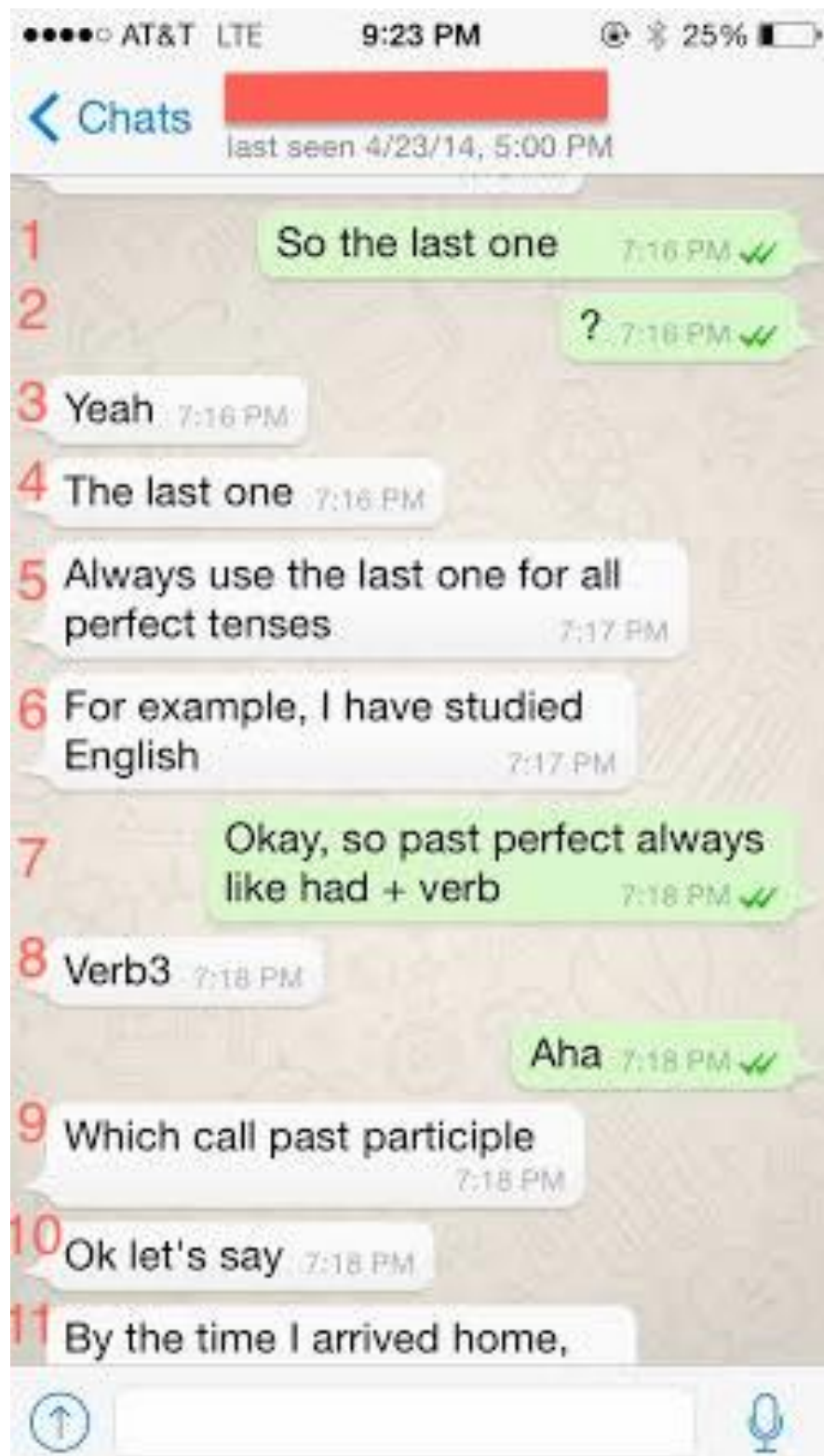


Figure 19: WhatsApp message-part 7 screen shot taken by the participant

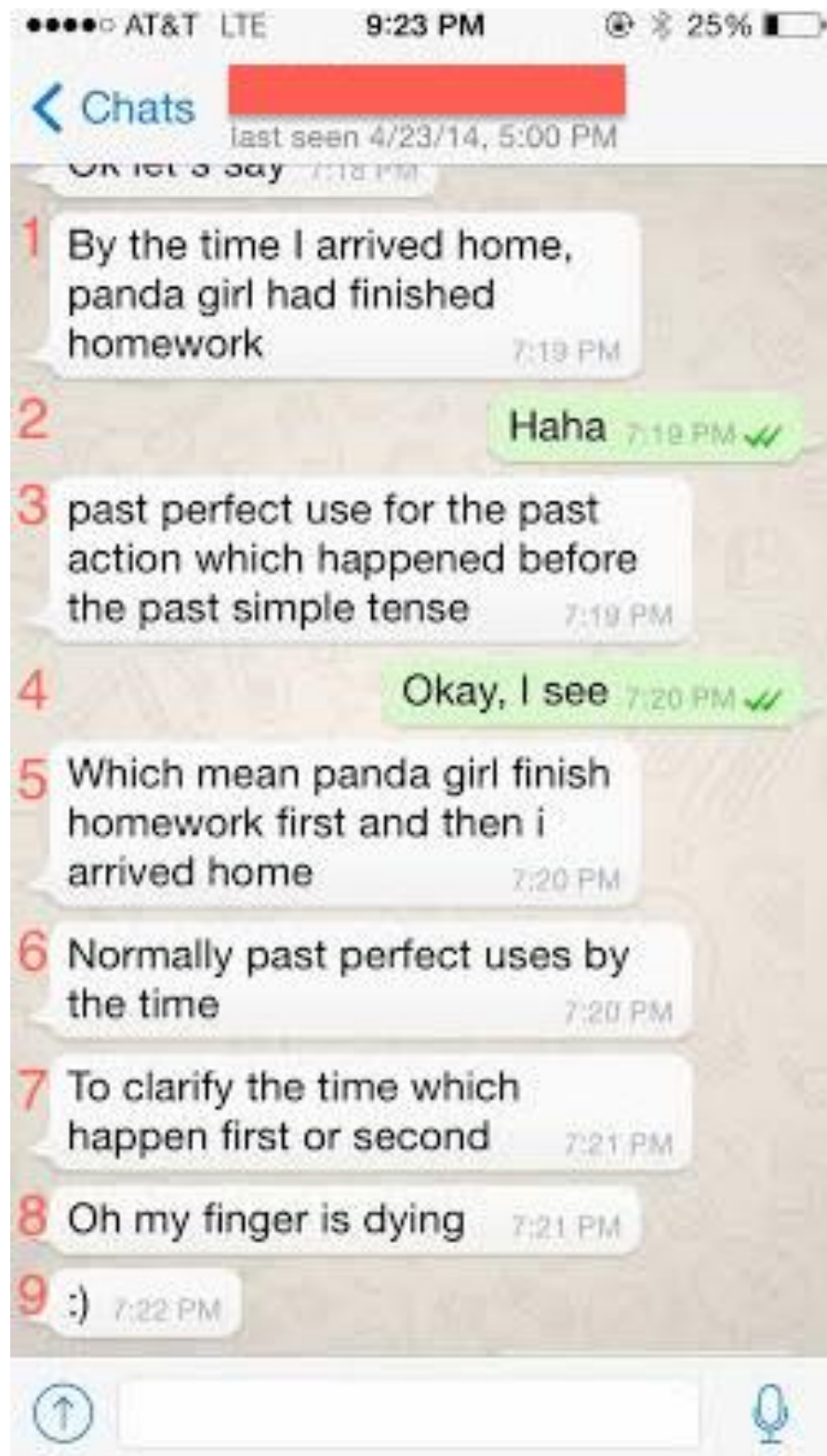



Figure 20: WhatsApp message-part 8 screen shot taken by the participant

Dani's WhatsApp messaging episode was mentioned in the last theme discussion on mediation and agency, but here I want to revisit this episode in light of linguistic growth. Although not much existing research is discussing ZPD through the medium of social media, there should be because of the influence of technology in everyday communication, especially among the younger generation such as that of my participants. Above are eight screen shots of the original WhatsApp messaging process between Dani and Chawit. Chawit played an expert's role in this virtual ZPD; his techniques to attract Dani's attention, detailed explanation, modeling the language use and feedback to Dani's practice also echoed Quinn's function in the last episode in terms of assisting Dani's higher mental process.

As seen in Figure 13, at 7:05 PM, Dan said, "*I didn't got a nice score this weekend*" (Figure 13, line#7), and at 7:06 PM, she said "*Reading is the most hardest*" (Figure 13, line#11). In Figure 14, Chawit started to point out her two grammar errors at 7:06 PM, "*when using hardest no need to use 'most' in the sentence...it is already superlative*" and "*did+base verb*" (Figure 14, line#3). When Dani responded with an emoticon  (Figure 14, line#4), Chawit may have sensed that his correction probably made Dani feel intimidated and embarrassed. In order to recruit Dani's attention in a less stressful way, Chawit followed by "*It's already superlative*" (Figure 14, line#15) and "*Just so you know*" (Figure 14, line#6). Studies show that collaborative interaction yields more productive learning than authoritative attitudes as in Guerrero and Villamil's (2002) study of peer collaboration in the English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classroom with focus on two novice writers in a revision task. The phrase "*Just so you know*"

(Figure 14, line#6) reflected Chawit's efforts to create a collaborative stance, or reduce the authoritative attitudes. This collaborative stances are achieved through "the atmosphere of mutual respect" (Guerrero & Villamil, 2002, p. 55) purposefully produced by Chawit.

Chawit's dialoguing and accessible manners successfully engaged Dani to ask more questions. We can see that Dani's response showed her passive reception of the tutoring with "*I haven't noticed it!*" (Figure 14, line#9) at 7:07 PM and "*Yeah, I got it!*" (Figure 14, line#11) at 7:08 PM. However, in Figure 15, at 7:09 PM, after Chawit says "*Be careful*" (Figure 15, line#6) and "*haha*" (Figure 15, line#7), Dani started to ask questions to clarify the conjugation of past tense. He not only gave explicit explanation but also gave examples to help Dani understand. When Dani asked him to explain more about the past tense, Chawit gave both positive and negative examples in Figure 17 to foster Dani's understanding, "*For example, I went to school last night*" (Figure 17, line#1) at 7:12 PM and "*I didn't go to school last night*" (Figure 17, line#3) at 7:13 PM. When he offered a tip to use specific time, Dani's reaction was "*Aha*" (Figure 17, line#5) at 7:14 PM. This indicated an Aha moment for Dani and she seemed to have mastered the essence of the past tense structure. It is also a sign to show the transit from interpsychological to intrapsychological functioning proposed by Wertsch (1991; 1994). In other words, the learner, Dani in this episode, moved through stages from other-regulation to self-regulation, and advanced to solve more problems independently (Wertsch, 1991; 1994). In the following conversation, Dani exhibited two moments of independent meta-linguistic analysis: "*So present perfect is have+ Verb*" (Figure 17,

line#9) at 7:15 PM and “*Ok, so past perfect always like had+verb*” (Figure 19, line#7) at 7:18 PM.

Chawit’s techniques and language to control frustration are also worth mentioning. After he presented several abstract grammatical terms such as present perfect and past participle, he was sensitive that Dani might feel frustrated with the complexity. Then he said “*OK that might be confuse*” (Figure 18, line#9) at 7:16 PM in Figure 18. Despite the fact that the sentence itself contains grammatical error, Chawit’s attempt to diminish the possible frustration grown in Dani demonstrated his sensitivity as a tutor. Additionally, when he gave examples, he connected them with Dani, as in “*By the time I arrived home, panda girl had finished homework*” (Figure 20, line#1) at 7:19 PM. *Panda girl* is the nickname that Chawit gave to Dani. He could have created a sentence using he or she or another name as the subject, but he chose *panda girl* with a purpose to connect with Dani. This example made grammar learning less dull and successfully cheered up Dani as we can see in Dani’s response “*Haha*” (Figure 20, line#2) at 7:19 PM. This is a revealing example of Dani’s language acquisition advancement through a virtual ZPD. The expert, Chawit in this episode, demonstrated several characteristics of tutorial interaction posed by Wood and colleagues mentioned above. He retained Dani’s focus on the issue, modeled examples, controlled frustration and fostered Dani’s higher mental activity reflected in her meta-linguistic analytical ability in a dialogic approach.

Dani’s example also can be explained with the concept *intersubjectivity*. Through languaging and scaffolding, participants reached the stage called intersubjectivity (Rommetveit, 1985). Intersubjectivity refers to the state of equal commitment to the task

from the participants who exchange roles as novice and expert, writer and reader. “Establishing and maintaining intersubjectivity are essential for development to occur within the ZPD” (Guerrero & Villamil, 2002, p. 55). In Dani’s interaction with Quinn, Nichole and Chawit, intersubjectivity was reflected in their efforts invested in the collaborative peer interaction. These three peers extended “genuine desire to help the partner complete the task successfully” (Guerrero & Villamil, 2002, p. 55); Dani made sense of abstract concepts through interacting with Quinn and negotiated meanings with Chawit. Their intersubjectivity led to Dani’s knowledge growth and linguistic gains.

Ben: Peer review in writing class

When I observed Ben’s academic writing class, the professor assigned them to have peer review on each other’s paper as a group of three people. Ben was in a group with two male students, Bruno from Brazil and Zhu from China. It was obvious that Ben had the highest English proficiency in this group and Zhu from China had the most struggles with the English language. In the peer review, Ben took over the leader role from the beginning to initiate discussion and he talked most when giving feedback to others. When his own paper was reviewed, Bruno gave more feedback than Zhu. I sensed that Zhu was slightly intimidated by the two other members. As much as Ben respected feedback from both classmates, he had more dialogue with Bruno than Zhu. Ben’s paper was about on-line teaching in universities and feedback to him consisted of unclear meaning and grammar errors, most of which were feedback from Bruno.

During our interview, I invited Ben to reflect on this peer review experience. He said, “I definitely play the leader role in this group discussion... On the paper, I made some unclear statements and they picked out. That's probably things that I learned. For example, ‘I said something like bla bla bla class is offered by university and went on’. They pointed out that I probably needed to use *universities* because I was not referring to a certain university but universities in general. It made sense” (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English). Ben is aware that Zhu’s English ability is limited, but he said he also learned from him but not as much as from Bruno. I observed that Bruno pointed out so many grammar errors in Ben’s paper that in the end, he explicitly apologized to Ben in the hopes that he did not offend or intimidate Ben. When asked how he felt about Bruno’s apology, Ben said he was not offended at all, “I was not offended.” He further explained, “He is from Brazil. His native language is Portuguese and Portuguese is a letter-based language with probably more complex grammar rules than English. I also worked with French people before and they were very picky about grammar even though they were writing in English... For me, I completely adopted the American way to write, but in his paper, a lot of the sentences are very descriptive, a lot of short paragraphs, and it is not the same way that I learned to write professional English” (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English). What made Ben completely adopt the American way to write? How did he adopt this writing style? These two questions bring us back to his previous learning experience to help us better understand his writing principle and his feedback to peers.

In the earlier discussion of Mrs. Kotty and the *The Scarlet Letter*, Mrs. Kotty asked Ben to read for main ideas but not the language. If we connect that episode with Ben's writing style, it may account for why he stressed multiple times that he focused on ideas without paying much attention to grammar. Therefore, when I asked him how much feedback he was going to adopt from his peers, he said he would make some changes on grammar and clarification, but he would not change his ideas. It is worth mentioning that in sociocultural framework, learning moments are connected to explain the influence of social, cultural, historical and community on learners' knowledge development. However, in this section, we will lay the focus on the interaction and learning that took place in the peer review.

When Ben gave feedback to his two peers, I noticed that he used respectful language like "you may want to" and "the word choice might be different" (Ben, class observation, 4/10/14). I asked Ben, because his English proficiency was higher, what he learned from this peer review? He responded, "I think the way to point out others' mistakes. The proper way to do so. I don't want to show off my English, that's a very offensive way to do so. I watch my language to use words like You might want to change this instead of This is totally wrong ...I don't show off. I am there to help. I am not there to show off. I am certainly not as good as many other people. I am also a learner. I don't want to take that role as their dictionary. I want them to do their own research rather than listen to me" (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English). He also said that he also learned to pay respect to others' feedback with humility. Even if he disagreed with the feedback, he would listen with respect. In fact, the observation reveals that he would

ask questions to clarify others' feedback and constantly defend his writing. The most frequent sentence from him in defense of his writing was, "I was more focused on content, but not grammar" (Ben, class observation, 4/10/14).

It is worth mentioning that in my field notes, Ben sometimes was quiet without much participation and sometimes actively engaged in tasks. This peer review class is just an instance that appeared once in the data, but it is salient for it reflects the influence of his cultural and historical background on his current study. I select this instance to exemplify ZPD in relation to Ben's previous experience.

Ben's writing class is an example of ZPD in a different context as Dani. It is through a more structured classroom activity where Ben achieved higher mental process and writing improvement. Donato (1994) explored the notion of mutual scaffolding among L2 learners through a study of three French novice learners' collaborative work. Results revealed that linguistic abilities do not hinder scaffolding from happening and novice roles are able to benefit from each other's scaffolded help. In Ben's peer review group, even though Ben's English was better than Zhu and Bruno, his writing skills were at about the same level as two others. They three played an equal role in this regard, but they benefited from each other's feedback. Data revealed that their feedback to each other provided affordances for writers to negotiate his ideas, and for readers "to see the text through the writer's eyes" (Guerrero et al., 2002, p. 55). Peer collaboration on language development was also evidenced in Ohta's study in 1995 when she investigated two Japanese students' classroom interaction. Her results divulge that language development takes place not only to the less advanced learner but also the more advanced learner with

opportunities for advanced learners to adjust and refine the language through interaction. Ben's learning happened in the same way. When the two less advanced learners Bruno and Zhu gave him feedback, Ben listened carefully, defended his idea, asked more questions and requested clarification of the feedback. This process was his attempt to adjust, to revise, to experiment and to test theories. After the peer review, Ben may make little changes to his ideas but he was definitely made aware of some grammar errors repeatedly seen in his own writing.

Besides linguistic development, Ben's sophisticated interpersonal and linguistic skills are also achieved in terms of how to give feedback and negotiate meanings with others. He explained that he learned to give feedback respectfully without showing any intimidation. That is an important skill to learn and cultural sensitivity is also nurtured in this process. Peer review endowed him the opportunity to learn about cultural influence on writing so he would not be offended when Bruno corrected his grammar errors. Furthermore, this cultural knowledge accumulation also nurtured his sensitivity when giving feedback, "I didn't point out the awkward sentences I saw in his paper because the main thing is focused on the general idea...it is not the same way that I learned to write professional English...so to me, I didn't point out the awkward sentences I saw in his paper... I didn't give him this feedback because this is his writing style and I don't want to say anything about it" (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English).

Comparing Ben's and Dani's stories, I see that their mediated learning occurred in different contexts, but both demonstrated intersubjectivity and multiple roles in ZPD. In Dani's interactions with three peers, Quinn, Nichole and Chawit, mediational tools and

signs were apparent to mediate learning. Their interaction was around Microeconomics problems, Statistics class and grammar structure. These tools were regarded as the target problems to solve, and language exchange is mediating the learning process. The language seen here consists of direct conversation and indirect texting/messaging. However, regardless of the form of language, languaging functions to transform interpersonal communication to intrapsychological development.

Ben's peer review showed that their roles were resilient and fluid. When he gave feedback to his peers, he was like an expert, but when his grammar errors were corrected, he was the novice role. Dani's roles with Nichole were also exchanged back and forth: Dani as the expert role in statistics study and as a novice in English proficiency. Similar to Chawit in Dani's episode, Ben adopted facilitative language to foster his peers' learning, such as advising, eliciting and requesting clarification (Guerrero et al., 2002, p. 55). When Ben said, "I don't want to take that role as their dictionary. I want them to do their own research rather than listen to me" (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English). It is an indication of how he and his peers reached the intersubjectivity, meaning their separate minds come together to make an equal commitment for improvement. If this process unfolded as Ben describes, then the ZPD was likely to have been created, and they were there to help each other reach the growth that they could not achieve if working alone.

5.2.2. ZPD between teachers and students

Research reveals that another context for the ZPD is between teachers and students. Through mediated instruction, teachers apply the concept of scaffolding to support students' learning. According to Lidz (1991), mediated learning experience is "mediator's adjusting the complexity and maturity of the teaching interaction to facilitate the child's mastery of the task, providing support when necessary; and providing encouragement and prompts to the child to move ahead when ready" (p. 80). Mediated learning and mediated instruction are patent in participants' interviews. For instance, Wen stated that she benefitted a lot from her Oral Skill class, particularly the video-recorded presentation and her professor's comments. She said, "老师会把 presentation 录下来, 然后每一个你这句话表达得不对, 然后给个 comment 说, 你这一点需要改, 这样说不好, 或者说这个地方你需要更多 eye contact, 会指出来。基本上一个 presentation 都会有 10 几个到 20 个 comment 上面, 然后会给我们每人发一个 link, 从 comments 里边看自己的录像, 边看 comments。我觉得有帮助。 Translation: The professor would record the presentation, and gave you feedback on every sentence. If your expression is problematic, she will comment that you need to change this way of expression. Or she will say you need to have more eye contact at this moment. Basically each presentation will have 10 to 20 comments. Then the professor will send us a link, and we can watch my own presentation while reading the comments. I find it very helpful" (Wen, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in Chinese). During class observations, I noticed multiple timed speaking activities in their ESL classes. Participants all expressed preference towards this type of activity. The professor was the facilitator and collected commonly shared mistakes to explain at the feedback section.

After timed speaking practice, professors gave the class longer presentational tasks. This is an example of mediated instruction as professors flexibly adjusted the complexity of the tasks and provided appropriate scaffolding at various maturity of learners' mastery of language.

Shan: scaffolding from David and Alyssa

Shan found her professors at the English Language Program particularly helpful for her English learning. She shared two stories with me, both of which involved professors fostering her academic learning through every day culture and her daily life.

David 的口语课。有次考试有口语和听力部分，我的听力特别差，还没有达到平均分数线。当时 David 特地给我发了邮件，说和我见面给我些建议，然后我就去了。David 就给我分析，他先是肯定，说你的 speaking 部分还可以，listening 部分不是特别满意。你平时是怎么去练习听力？我们刚进 ELP 时要设立三个目标，他说，你这三个目标都实现了吗？然后我说每天坚持下来很难，而且有些 listening 特别难，我听得不太好，不知道怎么做笔记。然后 David 告诉我去 Moodle 上听文章，有练习，要我别着急，慢慢来...从那以后我就特别练听力。Midterm 和现在我的 listening 都达到平均线上，我就很高兴。Translation: In David's Oral Skills class. One time our test consisted of speaking and listening. My listening was awful, and did not even reach the average score. David emailed me and said he would like to meet me to give me some advice. Then I went. David analyzed my performance on the test. He started with positive feedback, saying that my speaking was not bad, but listening was

not very satisfactory. How did you practice listening? When we entered the program we had to set three goals, he asked me, did you achieve these three goals? I told him that it was difficult to be persistent with practice and some listening was extremely hard. I didn't listen well and did not know how to take notes. David then told me to use more materials on the Moodle site for practice. He told me not to worry and take it slow... Since then I focused on listening practice. At Mid-term exam and my current listening tests, I score above the average line. I am very happy. (Shan, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese)

She was touched by David's attention to her and endeavors to know the hurdles she encountered and give advice accordingly. When David asked her to revisit the three goals that she had set before studying abroad, she felt the connection between her personal goals and her academic study, which motivated her to study hard and achieve progress.

Another influential teacher in her study abroad was her writing professor Alyssa, who guided her through hurdles to understand academic writing in American education.

美国 writing 和中国 writing 很不一样，写一个 idea 下面要有很多例子。写作老师 Alyssa 就特别耐心特别细心地跟我说，应该怎么写。最近的一个 project 是学习怎么运用 citation，我写了两个 draft。我找到 Alyssa，她就问我的观点是什么，你想用什么样的例子来反驳这个观点，然后一个一个例子帮我找出来。 Translation: American writing, unlike Chinese writing, requires many examples under each idea. My writing professor Alyssa was extremely

patient to explain to me in great details how to write. The recent project is about how to use citation. I wrote two drafts. I found Alyssa for help. She asked me, what is your opinion? What examples do you want to use to rebut this argument? Then she helped me find examples. (Shan, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese)

Shan said she did not understand the meanings of citation, topic sentence and rebuttal; however, Alyssa spent hours to help her go through her draft and taught her how to identify main idea, topic sentence and model to her how to cite examples. This was a memorable learning moment for her. She was able to keep her own ideas and gained knowledge in a one-to-one co-constructed learning environment.

In terms of classroom interaction and activities, most participants in this study reported positive learning experience from their presentational activities. Ben indicated that the presentation-based classes in the U.S. culture greatly improved his presentational skills which are essential to enhance his professional learning in the U.S. He described his public speaking class as giving him “foundation knowledge on how to make a presentation happen, how to deliver a speech. It gave me four or five times of being on the stage to practice” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English). He was also impressed with his teacher’s timely feedback after each presentation so he could diagnose problems in his presentation and make changes for the next time.

Similarly, Ju recalled how her teacher fostered her understanding of how to interact with visitors at presentations. She had plenty of presentational opportunities in the ELP program and her teacher guided her through presentational skills to interactional

skills by giving her freedom to choose a topic of her interest. She said the teacher would explain in class what presentation means and how to interact with audience. Moreover, her understanding was deepened when she had the hands-on activities, during which, her classmates and teacher gave feedback as audience. For instance, when the teacher noticed that her presentation was not inviting, one feedback was that “introduction 要有一个 attention getter, 你的开头 attention getter 不够好, 非常平常, 非常 general, 不 interesting. Translation: You need to have an attention getter in your introduction. Your attention getter is very general, not interesting enough” (Ju, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in Chinese). This feedback led Ju to consider what language can be more engaging. Instead of starting her conversation with the audience by using a Yes-or-No question “Do you have a special event in your traditional wedding?”, Ju considered a more inviting attention getter by saying “Please share a special event in your traditional wedding” (Ju, interview#2, 5/5/14). She found this feedback useful for her to understand the concept of *attention getter* and effectively bettered her interaction in class. Having a topic of her interest motivated her to talk more and audience’s reaction was an opportunity for her to learn how to engage others. Ju felt most confident and comfortable with her presentational skills over the semester and she credited it to teachers’ instruction in class and support during the presentation.

Vygotsky (1978) proposes that one essential feature of ZPD, Zone of Proximal Development, lies in that learning takes place through interaction with others or in collaboration with peers. Fostered learning applies to language, skills, knowledge and concepts. The aforementioned examples from the participants illustrated how teachers’

mediated instruction created a collaborative ZPD environment for the learner to improve their understanding of concepts, such as citation, presentation and interaction.

According to Vygotsky (1986), there are broadly two types of concepts: spontaneous or everyday concepts and scientific concepts. Everyday concepts are situational, empirical, and practical, which are internalized through everyday experience, while practical while scientific concepts are abstract and systematic definitions that are taught through formal instructions. Both types of concepts play a role in student learning and linking these two concepts can lead to the development of conceptual thinking, meaning the thinking that would allow learners to figure out solutions to any problem.

To link everyday concepts and scientific concepts together, mediated instruction (Lidz, 1991) and well-designed activities and practice are valuable in achieving the goal and leading to learners' higher mental process. In the examples above, professors utilized various approaches to help learners establish a connection everyday concepts and scientific concepts. In Shan's case, she understood the meaning of listening to someone in daily life, but she did not learn the systematic listening skills in English learning, which may result in her unsatisfactory score in the listening class. Besides classroom instruction, David noticed Shan's weaker skills and offered out-of-class support by inquiring her challenges and providing more resources. In Shan's writing class, she understood the everyday concept of telling a story but failed to understand the scientific concept of citation. Alyssa created a co-constructed learning environment for her, helped her develop the thoughts for the entire essay by asking a sequence of questions, “她就问我的观点是什么，你想用什么样的例子来反驳这个观点. Translate: She asked me,

what is your argument? What examples do you want to use to rebut this argument?”

(Shan, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese). Afterwards, Alyssa walked her through the process of selecting examples to match her opinions. This was a process for Shan to negotiate her meanings, revise ideas and imitate strategies of writing an argument. Imitation, or shadowing, is considered as playing a fundamental role in learners’ development (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Even though this concepts has been discussed mostly in learners’ language speaking development, (i.e. Lantolf, 2000), I argue that imitation can also foster learners’ writing development. When Alyssa modeled to Shan how to think through an academic writing, from deciding the main idea and rebuttal idea, to selecting germane evidence to support the idea, Shan learned to follow the steps and shadow the similar process. The process of developing arguments is the gap between what Shan could do on her own and her development with assistance from her professor. Imitation in this case is not imitating each word in writing but the steps taken to finish the writing. This ZPD linked Shan’s everyday concept of telling stories with the scientific concepts of citation, so she has deepened understanding of using relevant evidence to prove her ideas. Shan’s experience is similar to a study examined by Swain and her colleagues, where they investigated how teacher Penny guided student Thaya to make sense of the concept of writing (Swain et al., 2010). They conclude that adults move between everyday and scientific concepts to build their writing skills and increase stronger conscious understanding of the writing process (p. 52). I believe that after her interaction with Alyssa, Shan also learned to apply these writing concepts such as citation, rebuttal and topic sentences to solve her future writing problems. David and

Alyssa, as professors and tutors in the ZPD concept, demonstrated several important characteristics of scaffolding identified by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994): effective intervention with sensitivity to learners' level as in David's meeting with Shan, offering help when needed as in Alyssa's meeting with Shan, and using dialogues to mediate learning in both meetings.

The ZPD may have been created in the presentational activities reported by Wen and Ju. Their professors embraced diverse pedagogical scaffolding (van Lier, 1996) as mediated instruction to foster their understanding of concepts like engaging interaction. Pedagogical scaffolding, according to van Lier (1996), refers to teachers' strategic lesson planning and instruction with close monitoring students' learning. Wen's Oral Skills professor used video comment to start an interactive ZPD for learners' to reflect on their own performance with assistance of minute-to-minute detailed feedback. Ju's professor explained the scientific concept of engaging conversation in class and assigned the individual presentation activity along with Q&A section. The purpose of this activity was to assist the learners' understanding of the concept through actual practice. For both Wen and Ju, after their presentations, the Q&A section not only required them to interact but also offered affordances for feedback from audience, their classmates and teacher. Ju reported,

同学很感兴趣，他们也问一些问题，然后我就会思考...有的人只关注看 poster 不听我讲，那时候就会想办法，不要讲 poster 上的东西，讲讲别的，问问他是哪个国家的，找到相同文化的共鸣或影响等，然后来引起话题。

Translation: Classmates felt interested and asked some thought-provoking

questions. Some audience only focused on the poster without listening to me; then I would think about ways to engage them. I switched from the talking about the poster to something else. I asked him/her which country he/she was from and found the connections in cultures. That would help the conversation to proceed. (Ju, interview#1, 2/19/14, original answer in Chinese)

The feedback process may have created a ZPD because the audience offered scaffolding to the presenters regarding the way of engagement, clarity and presentational manners. If this opportunity did not exist, Wen and Ju may not have learned and tried alternative ways of presentation.

Wardekker (1998) describes the relationship between everyday concept and scientific concepts as a dialogic process; and the stimulus to start the dialogic relationship is reflection and practice. In other words, learners linked the everyday concept and scientific concept through reflecting on their related experience. Although Ben claimed to be talented in communication since young age and considered himself as a good actor, the concept of presentation is different from his everyday concept of speaking and acting. His public speaking class thus provided affordances for him to reflect on his weakness in public speaking, and relate to his prior experience. Similarly, without reflecting on her video comments from the professor, Wen would not have realized the importance of eye contact in presentation; without reflecting on the feedback, Ju would not have had more in-depth understanding of the concept *attention getter*. Interaction with the teacher created the potential for a ZPD where these participants advanced their knowledge, skills and conceptual understanding.

Chapter 6. Mediated Learning through Affect (emotion)

Intangible mediational means such as emotion, beliefs and attitudes are also explored in sociocultural studies. Emotions can refer to a learner's thoughts, feelings, motivation and self-positioning. Emotions are also regarded as socially constructed acts of communication and can be utilized to mediate one's behavior so as to develop learning (Imai, 2010; Swain et al., 2010). Vygotsky (1978) believes that individuals' idea represents some aspects of reality; emotion (also called affect) and cognition are integrally related. This study defines emotion in a sociocultural realm. In other words, emotions are believed to be socially constructed acts of communication and emotions can mediate one's thinking, behavior and goals (Imai, 2010). It is important to consider both thinking and feeling in investigating learners' knowledge growth because these two elements collectively may yield greater outcomes than working alone.

Closely related to emotion is the construct identity. This study draws definitions from various scholars and defines identity as a sense of self in multiple social roles and varied contexts (Mead, 1934; Norton, 1997; Peirce, 1995; Ting-Toomey, 2012). Identities are socially constructed, contextualized, multifaceted, evolving, negotiable, changeable, dynamic and fluid. In discussing identities, Norton (1997) believed in the connection between "the right to speak" and language learners' identity, so she used the term investment to "signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (p. 410).

Another construct that is often referred to is motivation. In the field of second language acquisition, Gardner and Labert (1972 cited in Kang & Pyun, 2013, p. 62) introduced two major motivational orientations: integrative desire and instrumental desire. Integrative desire refers to learners' desire to be connected with the target language group while instrumental motivation refers to practical reasons that drive individuals to learn L2. Ortega (2009) defines motivation as the "desire to initiate L2 learning and the effort employed to sustain it" (p. 189). Another influential explanation of motivation is Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, which consists of three major components: ideal L2 self, referring to an individual's ideal self in speaking L2; ought-to L2 self, referring to the qualities that we need to possess in order to avoid negative outcomes; and L2 learning experience, referring the decisive motives associated with the learning experience and environment (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005; Ortega, 2009). This study draws understanding from these scholars' explanations of motivation, and also discusses motivation in relation to identities and emotion.

Emotions, identities and motivations are used collectively in this section to make sense of participants' experience because identities, emotions and motivations all inform each other constantly during processes of language and culture learning. These three terms are used in plural form in this study because they are considered as changing, multifaceted and contextualized. Like other mediational means such as books, pens, signs and language, emotions, identities and motivations are also socially constructed and have intricate implications in cognition (Swain et al., 2010; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1994). In Imai's (2010) study on the role of emotion in a group of EFL learners' semester-long

joint project, he states, “emotions mediate development, especially when learning is embedded in an interpersonal transaction” (p.278). As Vygotskian ideas perceive thought travels from external and social sphere to internal and intrapersonal sphere (Vygotsky, 1978), I argue that it is also true in understanding emotions. In other words, the trajectory of emotions starts first on the social plane and then travels to the psychological plane. Although Vygotsky used the term *affect* instead of emotion, he repeatedly emphasized the interdependence of mind and body, thought and emotion, as he wrote, “thought has its origins in the motivating sphere of consciousness, a sphere that includes our inclinations and needs, our interests and impulses, and our affect and emotions. The affective and volitional tendency stands behind thought” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 282).

This study aligns with sociocultural perspectives in valuing the social constructiveness and external-to-internal trajectory of emotions, identities and motivations in learners. Substantial data from the participants in this study divulge that these three means played an important role in mediating their language and cultural learning in study abroad contexts. It should be remembered that while analysis of each participant may stress one tool, there are intricate webs of mediated learning. In other words, identities, feelings and motivation in many cases collectively take effect in mediating learning. One element may be more salient but other mediational tools also play a significant role in the mediation that should not be forgotten. For example, it is possible for an individual to invest in English learning because he feels proud to be able to speak a language, sees himself as a member of the English-speaking community, and

has desire to realize the ideal bilingual self (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005); therefore, three elements collaboratively mediate this individual's learning.

6.1. Mediated learning through identities

Identities are widely considered as socially constructed; our social interaction with different communities constantly produces, negotiates and shapes our multiple identities. Hall (1990) considers identity as constructed socially with involvement of power; Ngo (2008) further notes, "Rather than whole, seamless, or naturally occurring, culture and identity are the result of differentiation in social relations" (p. 6). In study abroad contexts, identities can be more sophisticated because we are interacting with members of the same region, members of the target culture and the members from the rest of the world. Different social relations yielded in various communities may cause international students to produce different identities.

The ten participants have expressed explicitly and implicitly how their identities are shaped in social communication and how identities are impacting on their learning. For example, Kang, the sophomore Financing and Accounting major, was so attached to his Chinese identity that he expressed little interest in hanging out with non-Chinese speakers. He lived alone, read Chinese overseas students blogging and spoke Chinese most of the time. He stated, "我一直觉得我是中国人这个 identity。对我将来很有影响。有句话说，我们这辈子都不可能成为美国人。即使你入了国籍，拿了绿卡，英文说得太好，都不可能成为美国人。 Translation: I always think that my identity as a Chinese is impactful on my future. In other words, we can never become Americans.

Even if you got the citizenship, got the Green Card, spoke perfect English, you cannot possibly become Americans” (Kang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese). Kang seemed to have a clear region-bounded definition of identity. Although he had a part-time job on campus and had academic projects that would require him to communicate with Americans or other non-Chinese people, his marriage to the Chinese identity appeared to refrain him from developing more exhaustive understanding of the target culture. Kang’s identity as a Chinese drove him to establish a friend circle with dominantly Chinese students, a career plan to return to China and a growing preference on Chinese food. Moreover, this Chinese identity motivated him to develop more critical lens to view his own culture and society with assistance of media and other resources. He used the Malaysian airline disappearance news as an example to illustrate that being abroad allowed him more access to read about China from an outsider’s stance.

Yang: an individual, independent and isolated observer and thinker

For another example, Yang’s identities as an observer and as a quiet thinker also determined her selection of tools to mediate learning. In the two interviews with Yang, she repeated 10 times that she was not a communicative person and the most effective way for her to learn was through observing and reflecting. Some of the sentences that she said were:

我不是很个很外向的人，会跟很多人交流和沟通。 Translation: I am not a very extrovert person to communicate and interact with others. (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese)

我不是一个很喜欢和别人交流的人. Translate: I am not a person who likes to communicate with others. (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese)

我不太跟人打交道. Translation: I do not often interact with others. (Yang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese)

我不太善于表达自己的想法, 自己长期不和别人沟通, 所以我不能清晰地表达自己脑中的想法. Translate: I am not good at expressing my thought. With a lack of communication with others for a long time, I cannot clearly express my thoughts. (Yang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese)

The understanding of Yang's identities formation and mediated learning is two-folds. This first one is her identity development through her linguistic interaction with others. Norton (1997) holds,

every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation. (p. 410)

Yang's self-awareness was gradually established through social interaction with others. Both in China and in the U.S., Yang made attempts to express her ideas with professors but failed because professors did not seem to understand her meaning.

我尝试过和老师沟通, 但是每次都, 怎么说呢, 主要责任在我, 我很难表达出来, 而且我的表达需要很漫长的过程, 我觉得老师不一定有这个耐心.

Translation: I tried to communicate with professors, but every time, how to say that, mainly because of myself, I couldn't express myself and it took a long time

for me to express myself. I don't think professors had that patience for me. (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese)

Multiple failed attempts strengthened her belief that she was not a communicative person and she would feel more comfortable alone. She confessed that since she came to the States, she realized an increasing social gap between her and the outside, the society. This gap is beyond the dichotomy of Chinese and American cultural difference; instead, it is a gap between herself and the society, as she stated, “我可以感受到自己和这个文化上的差异，我来了快两年了，我感受到的不仅仅是中西方文化之间的差异，更多的是我自己和外界社会的一种差异. Translation: I can feel the gap between me and the society. I have been here for almost two years. What I have felt is not simply a gap between eastern culture and western culture, but more about the gap between myself and the outside world” (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese). Her reflection may help to account for her sense of self. The failed attempts to make herself understood and the social gap in her mind possibly made her feel the incapability of communicating with others and therefore regard herself as an introvert thinker instead of communicator.

The second fold of understanding Yang's case is how these identities mediated her interaction with people and materials for learning. In discussing identities and motivation to learn, Norton has adopted the term *investment* instead of motivation to explore second language learners' dedication and involvement in learning because he believes that investment can better capture “the complex relationship of language learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it” (Peirce, 1995, p.

9). Norton believes that the socially and historically constructive relationship influences learners' agency, or desire to utilize available materials to enhance learning. She (Peirce, 1995) states,

I take the position that if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and materials resources, which will return increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on that investment—a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. (p. 17).

Norton refers symbolic resources to language, education, friendship and so on, while materials as more concrete and measurable such as real estate and money.

Norton's notion of identity and investment is supported by Yang's case. Yang's identities as an observer and independent thinker led her to negotiate her goals of studying abroad. During the process, conflicts sometimes occurred. For instance, she desired to become a university professor in the United States which would require her engagement in the academic world and the society, but she also saw herself as an observer in the society, “我到这里来，现在的身份是个观察者，没有融入到很多东西。 Translation: I am here and my current identity is an observer. I am not engaged in many things” (Yang, interview#1, 3/4/14, original answer in Chinese). Being an observer hindered her from being truly engaged in everyday interaction with people. Another example is the conflict between her determination to learn English well and her ambivalent desire to use the language. Her first and foremost goal in study abroad was to learn English well; to achieve this goal also required communication with people.

However, her identities urged her to purposefully keep a distance with others, “这个学期我刻意和人保持距离. Translation: This semester I intentionally keep distance with others” (Yang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese) and “其实我很多东西都喜欢自己单独做, 我不喜欢上课的时候老师让我们分小组讨论问题. Translation: In fact, I like to do things independently. I don't like to be assigned by professors in class for group discussion” (Yang, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese). The fundamental essence of sociocultural theory is learning through interaction with others. On one hand, Yang wanted to learn English well; on the other hand, she kept it to herself without little interaction in the community. The conflict occurred as a result of her socially constructed identities. It is reasonable to infer that despite her desire to invest in learning at the beginning, her failed attempts to communicate with professors and others shaped her sense of self as a less capable communicator. When she realized that her investment did not bring her “a good return” (Norton, 1995, p. 17), she became more introvert and independent.

Yang's identities as an observer and independent thinker also can account for her investment in utilizing materials in mediating her learning. She indicated that she did not know how to seek help from others. If she encountered difficulties at study, she would think, reflect, seek on-line information but rarely asked others.

我不会向人求助. Translation: I don't know how to seek help. (Yang, interview#2, 5/9/14, original answer in Chinese)

观察和反思是我自己学习和调整自己的一个很重要的方式。 Translation:

Observation and reflection are an important way for me to learn and to adapt myself. (Yang, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese)

As we have discussed in theme one, when Yang was preparing for her GRE test, she adopted audio books, movie sound tracks, vocabulary books and novels, and none of which indicated her interaction with people. In Norton's words, Yang's investment reflects her "as having a complex history and multiple desires" (Norton, 1997, p. 410). Her desires included learning the language well and staying to establish her careers, which were closely related to interaction with different communities in the American society; her desires also included being alone to herself, being an observer, being an isolated thinker and doer. Her identities and goals constructed her sophisticated investment.

Ben: Chinese, elite student, observer and advocate of Chinese culture

If you remember Ben's profile in Chapter 3, you may still be impressed by the international influence of his family members and relatives since his childhood. His overseas returnee parents, uncle in America, aunt in New Zealand and sister in France have planted a seed of internationalization in his life. He was excited to share with me how he developed international perspectives at a young age,

You get more understanding of different cultures. Culture is the root of the word global comes from, like the candies that my sister brought back to me. I did notice that they speak a different language, and what does it mean? Cause she was

babysitting at that time, so I would have questions about how French kids would do things. It's just some little things. It's not like a lecture or anything. And my uncle too. He would bring me Legos and he would tell me how popular these things are in the US. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

He admitted that "French chocolates were new and exciting because they were rare", but he was more intrigued by his relatives' stories, "When I was young, I liked to talk, talk to them about these (stories)". For instance, "My sister was telling about her babysitting experience, how she tutored the kid and picked up the kid. That was interesting because I used to have a baby sitter too. My baby sister was like a sixty-year old grandma, but she as a teenager. That kind of thing, it is kind of interesting to me" (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English).

In high school, he came to study in a catholic school in Chicago where he developed a considerable amount of knowledge of the American society and English as a language. He thought that even though Chicago was not a fully religious state, it was highly affected by religion. In his school, most of his classmates were from middle-class or upper class families, probably 90% of them were Caucasians. When asked to describe his life in Chicago, he made a comparison between the student demographic in the school and the happenings in the nearby neighborhood:

Most people are white there. Economically speaking, they might just get some benefits and social status are higher. Their family's income are stronger. We hear random gunshots, but not close to where we live. Those neighborhoods are not quite good. You know you saw those murders and those victims are mostly black

people, and that leads me to some kind of thinking, because races were part of it. I had to take a US history and US government classes, those were the classes I struggled the most but I did learn a lot about how the government works. And under the government and system, how things are working, like how do you issue a law, how do you pass an act, how do you choose your President. Those are the things that pretty much make America so unique, you know, stands out from the world. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

His comment inspired me to further inquire: whether and how he associates his knowledge from textbooks with actual happenings in the society. His answer was yes and then gave me an example of how he made sense of Obama's election as the first black president in history. He said that even though it was a breakthrough for the entire American society to have a black president, according to his observation and contemplation, Obama was not from a typical black family and received better education than average black families.

He also compared the current status of black people with that in the old days:

Tie back to the US history, during the colonial and black slavery time, those times were pure if you are black, you are a slave. But now people can succeed in sports area, entertainment industry, you name it. They can be successful, but they probably were not raised to be successful, as you know. They probably don't have the resources that most wealthy middle class or majorly Caucasian families have. They just happen to be successful because of their efforts. To answer your

questions, I can tie them together (book knowledge and his observations) but they are different right now. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

He also shared his experience of being a minority, the only Chinese student, in a Catholic school. He said,

At first, probably the first entire year, I feel like I was a guest. Because people will talk to you a lot. Because those families, the Dad may be business man having business with China. The mom may be co-working with Chinese colleagues. They had a lot of questions about China and I was willing to answer them. Topics were about what's the difference here? What is better? Do you like it? People were interested, but it was like an interview...Probably the second year when I came back, it was changing because I knew the school better. I knew the people better. We were actually having conversations about other things. What's going on in school? Those teenager topics sometimes. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

In the following narratives, he described a retreat where students were encouraged to share stories and speakers were invited to talk about how to deal with reality after high school is over. He stated that,

That was the most amazing experience that I've ever had...For me, it's a time for me to release my pressure, to explode the overwhelming energy that I used to be carrying. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

By the time Ben came to the University of Minnesota, he had developed near-native-like English proficiency and many Chinese students would consider him as an ABC

(American Born Chinese) after they heard him speak English. His easiness and confidence in speaking English and speaking about American society made many people, including myself, believe that he was like an American young man and he may stay in the U.S. for a long time.

However, to Ben, part of his goal was to learn about the professional life of the American culture, “I already see the life part already. It’s come to the job part. Because I have seen the relaxing life, the high standard life, it’s gonna be tied to work. How can they handle this? How can they build up the economics?... That might be the part that explains how the Americans become Americans most. It’s about the professional areas” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English). Moreover, his strong loyalty to his Chinese identity and passion about advocating Chinese culture were compelling. He explained that a more important goal than studying professional culture is to present Chinese cultures. He reported,

You know, sometimes it is irritating when they know absolutely nothing about China. When I firstly came here, somebody was like “do you guys have cows in China?” I was like Oh my GOD! They would show me really crafty chairs in China but I’ve never seen this type of couches or sofas in China. They are very ignorant. They still think a lot of things, like Chinese eat dogs, Chinese are all dirty, China’s dirty, which is partially true but you have to explain more. They can’t really distinguish Cantonese with Mandarin. They were just like, do you speak Mandarin or Cantonese? But you know Mandarin is the official language you learn, and Cantonese is something you speak at home. Right now they

probably won't treat Panda Express as Chinese, but you know. There is technically not real Chinese restaurants in the US. They all have to somehow fit in the American diet. That is ok, but they are still treating some food as Chinese food whereas they are not. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

When asked if he has strong identity as a Chinese, his answer was firm and absolute. Like another participant Kang, Ben also felt proud of being a Chinese person and superior being a Chinese who has known so much about America.

I feel superior. I feel superior about how much we know about America and they don't know about us. Even people back in China they know much more about the US than the US know about China. I feel superior. I feel we are building the global perspectives better than them. So now I ran out to introduce more about Chinese culture to the general American people than what they see on the TV. (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English)

In terms of future plan, he was clear with this orientation, "To tell you the truth, I won't stay here for the rest of my life. I will go back to China certainly because I grew up there...I still regard myself as a guest here...I am learning here...I still treat myself still as an observer. I still stay true to my identity by giving presentations about China and by sharing things" (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English).

Ben's excerpt is pregnant with interactions among identities, emotions and motivations in mediating his engagement with American communities and learning. Ben demonstrated multiple and complex identities over a few stages. Identities were not

isolated but interrelated with his feelings and his motivation in making an impact on his life from choosing to study abroad, to high school experience, and to his future plan.

To begin with, identity, emotion and motivation mediated his decision of study abroad. In this excerpt, he said that study abroad was a self-made decision. He identified himself as in a different category from many other Chinese students who adopted study abroad as an alternative way to escape from the fierce competition to universities in China. He had no worries about colleges or study because he was academically strong. His motivation to study abroad was two-fold: (1) His positive experience at 12 years old. When he reflected on the summer camp at 12, he expressed indirectly the pride of going abroad alone at such a young age by saying “You are only twelve and you traveled abroad to the other side of the world by plane” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English). The summer camp provided him with the opportunity to know a little bit of American culture. According to Swain and other sociocultural theorists, Vygotsky constantly made references to the interrelatedness of thought and emotion (Swain et al., 2010; Wertsch, 1991). As the first tenet of sociocultural theory states, human development has its origin in social sources. Individuals’ thought and behavior have origins in our interests, inclinations, needs and emotion (Vygotsky, 1978). Ben’s positive emotion after the summer camp stimulated his stronger desire to explore America more. (2) He saw himself an explorer to know more about the world. When he talked about his academic strength back in China, he emphasized his agency to choose to study abroad instead of being placed to study abroad by parents. There was a sense of pride and confidence in his statement. He said that he had many options to study abroad, but “I

chose America because I wanted to learn this culture the most” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14). Without academic pressure and with a network of support at home, he made the decision based on his interest in knowing more about America. According to Gardner (2001, p. 5), this is “a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community”. This identity as an explorer and pride allowed him to start the sojourner life with more pleasure and openness (Gardner, 2001).

Secondly, his first year and second year of experience in American high school was mediated by his sense of self and emotion. Identity is never determined by one person but is socially constructed every time people interact with others (Swain et al., 2010). During his first year in the catholic school, he saw himself as a guest because of the way others interacted with him: “I feel like I was a guest”, “People were interested, but it was like an interview” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14). His identity was an international student, a minority, an ESL student and a guest. Swain (2010, p. 87) argued that “(s)ome identities are ascribed by others, while others are claimed by the individual him or herself”. To Ben, others ascribed him as an outsider, a minority and that interwove with his self-identification. These multiple identities were result of him being from a different place and speaking a different language. However, these identities urged his investment (Peirce, 1995) to be more engaged in the local communities so others would adjust their views on him. He was motivated to improve not only English but also cultural knowledge.

He explained that after the second year, he had more to relate to the classmates and he said, “We were actually having conversations about other things” (Ben, interview#1,

3/3/14, original answer in English). The change of dialogue content not only more effectively related him with the external world but also adjusted how he felt about the community. The identity shifted from being a guest to insider functioned to mediate his more in-depth and intimate communication with the group. He told me about a religious field trip where everyone shared stories with trust to the group. The fact that he was included in the field trip was a reflection of him being regarded as a member of the group, “For me, it’s a time for me to release my pressure, to explode the overwhelming energy that I used to be carrying. That was the most amazing experience that I’ve ever had” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English). This investment rewarded him with good result that he released the pressure and drew him closer to his catholic school cohort. His interaction and ability to speak English changed in the second year, and his dialogues with cohort extended to more topics.

Thirdly, as social identities are multiple and a site of struggles (Peirce, 1995, p.20), his identity struggle is salient when American public make negative comments about China. Since he started the undergraduate study, he is constantly exposed to stereotypical statements about China, such as Chinese eating dogs, China being dirty, Mandarin and Cantonese being the same, and Americanized Chinese food being authentic Chinese food. He thought that even Chinese people in China now would know more about America than what Americans would know about China. Such communication with American general public also caused struggling emotion in Ben. On one hand, he felt frustrated at the ignorance and long-rooted distorted understanding of China; on the other hand, he repeated “I feel superior” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English) in three

consecutive times to stress his pride in the more developed understanding among Chinese, as he said “I feel we are building the global perspectives better than them” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English).

As Peirce argues, to study a person’s language learning, it is important to “develop a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction” (Peirce, 1995, p. 12). This excerpt evidenced that Ben was frustrated with the out-of-date and biased stereotypes that Americans held towards China. He may consider the source of ignorant comments as the unequal economic development and biased media coverage that have been deeply rooted in a larger international context. This daily social interaction reinforced his identity as a Chinese; when asked if he held his Chinese identity strongly, he asserted,

Of course! A lot of people say that I am very knowledgeable about US society and culture, but after all, I am still a Chinese and I still hold it as my responsibility to be in US to let people know about China. And that’s the goal I want to achieve, and probably a bigger goal than achieving a degree here and find a job. (Ben, interview#2, 5/5/14, original answer in English)

As a result, his identity as a Chinese mediates his approach to the local community and he seeks his mission “So now I ran out to introduce more about Chinese culture to the general American people than what they see on the TV” and “I still stay true to my identity by giving presentations about China and by sharing things” (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English). He decided to host cultural presentations to bridge

the gap of understanding and by the end of the data collection, he already delivered two presentations to public and received very positive feedback on his comparison between American educational system and Chinese educational system. His goal to share Chinese culture also encouraged him to participate in other relevant events. For instance, he participated in several research studies on international students' perspectives and adjustment in study abroad, and he was active in networking at a recent event on China's educational exchange history with the University of Minnesota. Even though this event was open to the public, I noticed that most of the attendees were professionals from business and educational industries. Ben was one of the few undergraduate students. I observed that Ben not only attended presentations but also demonstrated exceptional networking skills to communicate with other audience.

At last, his *Ideal Self* (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005) and perceptions of who he is mediate his plan for the future. While I was amazed at his native English pronunciation, his comfortable adaptation to American life style and his close connection with the American students, he surprised me by being firm with his decision to return to China in the future. During the interview, he repeated that his goal in the United States was to develop the professional side of himself. He ideal self was to contribute to the severe food safety issues in China and therefore he chose food science instead of pure lab-based chemistry study. In order to work effectively and efficiently in China in the future, he strived to grow professionally during his learning in America. "I still regard myself as a guest here...I am learning here...I still treat myself still as an observer" (Ben, interview#1, 3/3/14, original answer in English), these sentences are telling because they show that

Ben felt a stronger sense of belonging towards China. His sense of self as a learner and guest mediated his action to maximize his learning within the limited time by engaging in different activities such as student organizations, part-time jobs and social gatherings, because he wanted to reduce the discrepancy between actual self and ideal self (Dörnyei, 1990; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005).

Ben's data shows how his identities were in a constant state of shifting, developing, confirming and reconfirming along with this interaction with different people in two societies, America and China. Interviews and observations of Ben unveil a set of complex and interrelated tools and signs that mediated his language learning and culture understanding during his study abroad. These mediational resources include language, engagement in communities, textbooks and observations.

6.2. Mediated learning through motivation

The discussion of motivation has expanded from pure psychological field to a way bigger interdisciplinary field. Second language acquisition scholars problematize the conventional concept of motivation as quantifying learners' commitment to learning the target language; instead, Gardner and colleagues (1985) propose the notion of instrumental and integrative motivation for the field of SLA. In the field of L2 learning, motivation is often understood as "the desire to initiate L2 learning and the effort employed to sustain it" (Ortega, 2009, p.168). Motivation is often explored in relation to identities, investment within the broad sociocultural framework to explain mediated learning. Peirce conceives, "An understanding of motivation should therefore be

mediated by an understanding of learners' investments in the target language-investments that are closely connected to the ongoing production of a language learner's social identity” (Peirce, 1995, p. 20).

Ortega has synthesized a list of main antecedents investigated in L2 motivation research, including: attitudes towards the L2 community and its speakers, integrativeness, attitudes towards instructional setting, orientations, social support, inter-group contact, ethnovitality, self-confidence when using the language (Ortega, 2009, p. 172). These antecedents emerge across cases in the current study and they collectively inform us of how mediated learning occurred to the learners.

Dörnyei and his colleagues propose a set of alternative interpretation of motivation. They have identified three main components to explain why learners are motivated to learn the second or other languages, including *ideal L2 self*, *ought-to L2 self* and *L2 learning experience* (Dörnyei, 1990; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005). While investment (Peirce, 1995) may better capture the complex relationship of a learner’s multiple desires to speak the second language in relation to his/her social identities, motivations shed more light on the influence of learners’ future-oriented goals on current learning. Motivational Self System also considers individuals’ complex learning experience in relation to their identities in three phases: *ideal self* and *ought-to self*. I consider both investment and the Motivational Self System as not opposite but valuable and complementary lenses to explore this topic. In response to my first research question *What mediational means are used in study abroad settings by international students to adjust to a new social and academic context?*, like emotion and identities discussed

above, motivations can also be adopted as mediational means to foster learning. The Motivational Self System has interwoven connections with identities, desire, emotion and investment. Data in the current study can be understood through the construct of motivation as multiple participants adopted their future goals as symbolic tool to mediate their behavior in the study abroad contexts.

Shan: "What kind of bag is suit for me?"

Shan, a 22-year-old ELP student was working hard to pass the TOEFL test so as transfer to the undergraduate program in the University of Minnesota. She had clear long-term goals during study abroad: speaking fluent English and settling down in the United States to establish her career and family. Nevertheless, her aspiration was overshadowed by her language proficiency immediately after her arrival in the United States.

我刚来美国我根本听不懂他们说什么。比如说去 CVS 买东西，别人说你需
要办卡吗？那个时候我根本听不懂，所以我就说 no no no no no,但是后来他
说可以有什么打折的，我就说 ye ye ye ye ye。他们就很茫然...有的时候还莫
名其妙地乱花钱...别人问我要不要加饮料，其实我根本不需要的，但是我以
为到了美国就 ye ye ye ye ye，所以就交了...有的时候刚来课堂想和老师交
流，但是我根本听不懂，就只能 ye ye ye ye,老师说 Do you understand? 我还
假装说 ye ye ye ye,其实我根本听不懂。

Translation: When I firstly arrived, I couldn't understand a word they said. For
instance, I went shopping in CVS and the cashier there asked me if I wanted to
apply for a card. I couldn't understand and just said no no no no no. Then he said
something like discount, I said ye ye ye ye ye. People there were confused by

me...Sometimes I also spent extra money unnecessarily...(when buying food)
Sales people asked me if I wanted to add a drink. I actually didn't want it, but I couldn't understand and thought I just needed to say ye ye ye ye ye, so I bought extra drinks...Sometimes in class, I did want to communicate with the teacher, but I couldn't understand at all. I always responded ye ye ye ye, and the teacher asked, Do you understand? I still pretended and said ye ye ye ye. In fact, I couldn't understand at all. (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese)

Shan easily gathered three examples to illustrate her frustration with self and the situation. Realizing her own struggles and the gap between her goal and her current proficiency, Shan employed varied approaches to help herself improve English. She signed up for language partners programs in hope to be paired up with a local student to help her with English, she attended student associations to increase chances to know native English speakers, and she watched numbers of American TV shows to improve listening. However, the most memorable events that boosted her confidence as an L2 learner was her first independent trip to a shopping mall.

我自己想去尝试，我对舍友说，我明天去 mall，你们都不要跟着，我要自己去尝试...就是去 Guess 里面，我想买一个小包。我想让她帮我选一下，我不知道我适合什么样的包...I don't know..what kind of bags is suit for me. show me。她明白了，然后我就很开心 (laugh)，然后她就给我一个一个介绍。然后我第二句就是说,哦，哦，哦，is it new? 就是说是不是给我一个新的。

她就说我们所有都是新的。哎呀觉得自己好牛啊！到最后她问我要不要那个收据，我也听懂了 (laugh)!我说要要。这次是真要，因为我真听懂了。

Translation: I wanted to try on my own. I said to my roommate, I am going to the mall tomorrow. You don't need to come with me. I want to try....In the Guess store, I wanted to buy a small purse. I wanted her to help me choose one as I didn't know which one would suit me, "I don't know what kind of bags is suit for me. Show me." She understood. Then I was very happy. Then she introduced each one to me. Then my second sentence was, um, is it new? Asking if she could give me a new one. She told me all of them were new. Wow, I felt so great! At the end, she asked me if I wanted the receipt, I also understood. I said yes yes. This time I really meant yes because I truly understood. (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese)

I wish these words could capture the pride shown in Shan's face and tones when she was sharing this story. Although the communication was nerve-racking to Shan, this successful shopping trip empowered her with courage to use the English language more. She told me that this experience filled her with confidence to eat alone and to deal with banking issues alone afterwards. Now she did not need to spend extra money because she understood what food vendors said and she was extremely proud to communicate with the bank to apply for a new debit card after the old one was broken. This seemingly simple shopping experience in the mall has become a memorable milestone in Shan's study abroad experience.

Shan's story is thought provoking as it shows how her first independent shopping experience transformed her behavior with the external world to her internal world. In sociocultural framework, regulation refers to monitoring and controlling one's behavior (Swain et al., 2010; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1996). Other-regulation (Lantolf, 2000), meaning that other's assistance can mediate learners' development and other-regulation leads to a more in-depth stage where learners themselves develop internally. It is important to remember that other-regulation and self-regulation are not separated or develop in a permanently linear manner (Lantolf, 2000; Swain et al., 2010). In other words, self-regulation can mean seeking help from others; in return, other's help can foster self-regulation. Shan underwent the intertwined relationship between self-regulation and other-regulation. When she experienced enough embarrassment and frustration resulted from not being able to communicate with native speakers, she told herself that this situation should stop, as she recalled her private speech “但是后来我觉得这样不行，我不能老是靠别人。 Translation: Then later I realized this would not work. I cannot always rely on others” (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese). Her private speech, as self-regulation, was adjusting her behavior to be more proactive. Part of her plan to be an active learner was to seek help from others, including reaching out to tandem learning project and joining student organizations. Shopping at the mall was a leap forward that fostered her learning.

She made an effort to purchase a bag by herself, which was consistent with her goal to outreach to the community. While her question *What kind of bag is suit for me* was grammatically incorrect, it successfully achieved the pragmatic purpose and more

importantly, it functioned to achieve the trajectory from Shan's interaction with external world, the Guess sales person, to internal world, herself and confidence enhancement. During the interview, she repeated the phrases “我还行. Translation: I am quite good” and “还可以. Translation: pretty good” at least ten times to show her pride and excitement for this breakthrough. This experience evidenced the importance of emotion in mediating international students' interaction with others. Her faith in self was boosted and this momentum urged her to accomplish more tasks independently, from purchasing food to solving banking problems. She summarized that her experience made her feel so proud, as in “我觉得听懂的感觉真的很好. Translation: It feels so good to be able to understand” (Shan, interview#1, 3/18/14, original answer in Chinese), that she was more confident to realize her future goals. This positive experience helped to shape her identity as a learner and her investment to mediate her future learning.

In addition, beliefs, attitudes and *ideal-L2 self* referring the specific ideal self that can speak an L2 (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005) form a web to collaboratively mediate learners' behavior towards language and cultural learning. A case in point is Wen's endeavor to get involved in the local communities. Wen had a clear goal to become a businesswoman and settle down in the United States for life. This mature 30-year-old student came to the United States with some work experience. She was aware of the importance of speaking fluent English in order to realize her career goal; therefore, she established her *ideal L2 self* (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005) as someone speaking fluent English. Her ideal L2 self also included knowing the culture and attaining intercultural competence in daily communication with others. In order to reduce the gap between her

current self and the ideal L2 self, Wen valued communicating with people, seeking opportunities to use the language and being engaged in local events. This belief has mediated her attempts to create opportunities for learning. She found a tandem partner to practice English, she moved out from the free accommodation provided by her cousin in town so as to live with native speakers, and she insisted on speaking English when she was with her Taiwanese friend who shared similar learning goals.

A similar experience was also discovered in Ben's interviews. As Ben's long-term goal was to become a professional and intercultural competent person, he tirelessly invested time and effort in relevant events, including working for the international students office, delivering presentations on Chinese culture to the public and taking over various leadership roles in several student organizations. Ben claimed that these investments were preparing him with skills and knowledge to realize his future goal. Ben, Shan and Wen used their examples to add support to research claims that learners with career orientation tend to employ a wider range of strategies and to utilize the strategies more frequently (Kang & Pyun, 2013; Mochizuki, 1999; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). We can also employ the notion of ideal L2-self as motivation to explain how this motivation mediated their interaction with the social world. In particular, Ben's selection of events to get engaged with also echoed with Haneda (2005) in that his learning desires mediated his investment with the particular communities that he envisioned to belong to in his career future. Ben selected the international office to maximize his exposure to various cultures; he participated in the particular student organization GCC whose mission was to promote Chinese cultures to American communities; he took on leadership roles in other

events because that job would require professionalism from him. He strategized his investments to facilitate his learning towards the goals, which included becoming a professional in American society and presenting Chinese culture.

Chapter 7. Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore, from Chinese students' perspectives, what mediational resources were available to them and how they utilized these resources to foster learning in study abroad contexts in the U.S. It was not my purpose to measure the linguistic gains or intercultural sensitivity; instead, students' perspectives and stories are shared to discuss how mediated learning occurs. The purpose of entire research was to seek answers to the following four research questions:

1. What mediational means do international students use in study abroad settings to adjust to a new social and academic context?
2. Why do they choose to use these means?
3. How do these international students interact with the mediational means?
4. What influences international students' mediated learning in study abroad?

In this last chapter, I will discuss the implications from the findings and the limitations of this study; I will also provide suggestions for future research and end with conclusion remarks.

7.1. Summary of findings

In response to research question #1, findings unfold a wide range of mediational tools and a series of mediated actions: dialoguing with others, speech with self, technology-facilitated communication, consulting experts, and using various materials for information. Concrete materials include novels, movie sound tracks, dictionaries, media resources and so on. I displayed brief examples including Shan' learning BFF (Best

Friend Forever) from TV show *2 Broke Girls* and Kang's contemplation on multinational media coverage on the disappearance of MH370, to discuss the *affordances* (Swain et al., 2010) of online resources and technology. Moreover, language is undoubtedly an essential tool to mediate learning, along with other semiotic signs. Language plays multiple roles in participants' learning. Private speech occurred with many learners: Shan's private speech mediated her determination and directed her practice to achieve her academic goals (Swain et al., 2010). Jian's private speech not only offered him comfort and confidence to learn but also assisted with self-correction in speaking. Language also mediated Jian's learning through culturally varied connotations, as in his reaction and improved critical analysis of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*. Additionally, Ben's understanding of the professional email genre and the U.S. rubric system adapted his interaction with professors, supervisors and peers so as to adopt a professional tone in his interactions.

In response to research questions #2 and #3 regarding how these materials are used to mediate learning, one important theme is interacting with other people to maximize the use of materials. By sharing the stories from Ben and Dani, I aim to illustrate the profound influence of significant items and the role of other people in achieving the learning goal. Ben received the simplified novel *The Scarlet Letter* from Mrs. Kotty; this interaction opened a window for him, through which he saw the American class culture and focus of writing. Dani conquered the difficult psychology textbook with the assistance from her professor; it not only enhanced her scores but also her self-confidence as a strategic learner. These artifacts embody both materials and symbolic aspects to direct learners' activities to make changes externally and internally

(Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Additionally, sense of pride, beliefs, attitudes, career goals and ideal future self served as tools to mediate participants' learning desires and investment in taking actions or adjusting behaviors to achieve higher mental and cognitive development.

In response to research question #4, findings elucidate some noteworthy elements that influence learners' interaction within the sociocultural world and mediated learning, including participants' prior learning history, cultural background, belief in learning, goals and current programs they were placed in. As mentioned before, sociocultural theory does not explore learning without relating to learners' history and contexts; therefore, participants' history and the study abroad contexts are influencing their choice of mediational tools and interaction with the means. There is evidence to show that participants in the collaborative China-Minnesota program were influenced by the program design in their study abroad experience. For instance, all participants in this program reported that living with the Chinese cohort limited their exposure to the target communities. Additionally, individual differences also influenced participants' decision to use available materials. Yang is one example to show how her introvert personality directed her to maximize using tools instead of interacting with other people to mediate learning.

7.2. Theoretical relevance

This study contributes new knowledge about the role of mediation in learning. These findings exemplify the central role of mediation in learning; more importantly, this

study extends the application and discussion of sociocultural theory in the following aspects: (1) This study contributes to the knowledge base of understanding learners' language *and* culture learning as an *integrative* process. Numerous existing studies center on either language *or* culture learning outcomes, with few studies concerned with *both* aspects. In this paper, Jian's sense-making process of the controversial TV show *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and the connotation of the word *interesting* is a compelling example of how language and culture learning occurred simultaneously. Other examples include Shan's and Ju's poster presentation experience in ELP classes. Their teachers' instruction and the peers' scaffolding not only improved their language proficiency but also helped them realize the constructive learning culture in the American academic context. This research project intends to break the either-or dichotomy and to inspire more future research to address both aspects.

(2) Secondly, this study extends the discussion of mediation. The first feature of mediation is being an active process (Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995). This feature emphasizes that mediation occurs only when individuals use cultural tools. However, what is missing, or not discussed enough, is the role of interacting with other people in applying the cultural tools. Numerous examples in this study suggest that the process of using the mediational tools is inseparable from interacting with other people. Instances include Ben's use of the book *The Scarlet Letter* through interacting with Mrs. Kotty, Dani's comprehension of her Psychology textbook through interacting with her professor, and Shu's understanding of the phrase BFF (Best Friend Forever) from the TV show through trying it on her friends. This study conceives that discussion of mediation should

also extend beyond the use of tools and signs; instead, discussion should include interpersonal interaction to explain the complexity of using mediational tools.

(3) Last but not least, this study also expands the list of mediational tools and signs. Vygotsky (1978) divided mediational means into two broad categories: concrete tools such as books and brush pens and semiotic signs such as language and number systems. Data in this study display that new technology and media emerge as popular and effective tools to mediate learning. Dani's linguistic gains through instant messaging with her Thai friend Chawit demonstrated a convincing example of virtual ZPD. Additionally, most participants in this study mentioned a variety of technological tools and media resources as helpful tools for their learning, including media reports, on-line academic journals, TV shows and movies, on-line translator software, phone applications and so forth. This paper discussed how technology served as an important mediational tool in learning (Lantolf, 2000), especially for the student population with increased accessibility to such resources.

Moreover, this study also highlights that emotions, identities and motivations also are mediational tools in learning. Traditionally, emotions and motivations are concerned and explored in quantitative research (e.g., Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005). However, scholars such as Merrill Swain (2011) advocated the study of emotions as a mediational tool in sociocultural studies in her plenary speech at the CLESOL Conference, "Emotions are socially and culturally derived and, along with cognition, they mediate learning" (p. 2). Findings in this study show that emotions, motivations and identities were influencing participants' decisions about which tools to use and how to use these tools. For instance,

Ben possessed a strong identity as a Chinese person, which shaped his goals and goal-oriented activities. Ben's goal was to be trained to become a successful professional in the United States; therefore, he attended career-related events and adopted proper email styles as mediational means to learn professional knowledge and professional social skills during his study abroad. His involvement in professional events was evident in his interview data and observational notes. Similarly, Shan's motivation to become a fluent L2 speaker urged her to take the first step to do shopping alone in a mall. Her data indicate that, her embarrassment of not being able to understand English in class and in everyday activities, and her motivation to realize the ideal L2 self (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005) collaboratively mediated her action to try and achieve improvement. Emotions, identities and motivations are not commonly seen as mediational means in studies, but this research project adds to the knowledge foundation and strengthens the argument.

7.3. Implications

Data in this case study reveal that learning is not isolated from materials, people, social contexts and self; as a result, findings are illuminating to various stakeholders, including learners, program administrators and instructors. It is the purpose of this section to explore these enlightening implications.

For learners

I will begin with the center of this study--the learners. The first implication for learners is to draw on multiple resources for learning. This study reminds learners, study

abroad students in particular, of learning opportunities around them such as people and materials, and of the importance of reactivating their unique cultural knowledge and prior history. It is also important for learners to know, to understand and to remember that learning does not necessarily rely on one sole tool. Instead, learning takes place through a series of mediated actions (Kang & Pyun, 2013). For example, Ben's learning was mediated by his identities, comparative thinking between textbook knowledge and observed social phenomena, reading academic journal papers, imitating the use of professional terms in emails; Dani's learning was mediated by talking with more capable peers and seeking professor's help to conquer difficult textbooks; Yang's learning was mediated by more concrete materials such as sound tracks, novels, dictionaries, and class recordings; Shan's learning was mediated by private speech, menus, talking with local communities and so on. None of the participants in this study used the exact same set of materials; multiple tools and signs collectively mediated their learning.

Secondly, it is central for study abroad students to be aware of the value of interacting with people in mediated learning, including local communities and classmates from various regions. Lantolf segments three categories, mediation by others, mediation by self, and mediation by artifacts (Langolf, 2000). Study abroad students may have preference and desire to communicate with local students or fluent speakers of the target language, but data reveal that communicating with classmates and more capable peers is equally valuable. During collaborative work, individuals can benefit from a more capable peer's scaffolding towards problem solving, so as to reach a potential development level, as Vygotsky (1978) called it Zone of Proximal Development. I investigated Dani's study

buddies, Ben's peer review writing class, Dani's grammar tutoring via WhatsApp messaging, Shan's interaction with her listening professor and writing professor. These examples show that *scaffolding* (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) from other people creates ZPD to advance knowledge, skills and conceptual learning. It is important for study abroad students to be open minded to try diverse approaches and select the ones that are most suitable for their study at a certain context.

At last, this research enlightens study abroad students to develop critical attitudes towards others *and* self. Participants in this study demonstrated certain extents of reflexivity, as they reflected on their study abroad situations, compared and contrasted multiple cultures, and critiqued others' misconceptions of China. However, one emerging issue lies in that they may need more reflection on some of their *own* cultural misconception or stereotype. For instance, on one hand, participants were offended by such stereotypes as Chinese eating dogs and Chinese students never engaged with others; on the other hand, they also made similar comments like *American young people all care about partying, drugs and sex*; or remarks like *The low-income neighborhoods are dangerous*. While they wanted to break stereotypes, they themselves exhibited other stereotypes and bias. I concur with extensive studies that study abroad is an opportunity to confront stereotypes, to question one's worldviews, to be exposed to diversity, and to nurture critical views towards others and self (Berg et al., 2009; Carlson et. al, 1991; Haddis, 2005; Yang, 2012). It is important for study abroad students to reflect constantly on their own feeling, thinking and learning through critical lenses. This process may not be smooth because it involves continuous identity negotiation, challenging prior beliefs

and critiquing predominant thought; however, it is this process that urges higher level of development. Many participants thanked this research for an opportunity to really recall their study abroad experience and to become more reflective, which is one important goal that this study hopes to achieve.

For program administrators

Results from this study also offer some implications for study abroad program administrators and organizers. The first implication is on the importance for programs to view study abroad as a holistic learning experience and to provide guidance in collaboration with other offices and organizations. One of the major concerns from participants in this study is lack of the opportunities to communicate with local communities. Participants from the collaborative program CM all reported that living together with the cohort limited their interaction with local people but increased their reliance on other Chinese students. Even though program administrators may find this model helpful in managing logistics, students' learning should be placed as priority and alternative options could be taken regarding logistic management. Admittedly, the age of the learners should also be taken into consideration in designing if cohort should live together. Alternatively, future programs may consider arranging cohort to live together for a short period of time and then requiring students to live with members of other cultures; this way may meet both purposes of emotional reliance and independence training. Other options to ensure support from the program administrators can include

weekly meetings for the cohort, walk-in consultancy, or social events to bring cohort and members of other cultures.

Another obstacle to communicate with local communities reported in this study is the lack of response from supporting facilities. For instance, Shan signed up for tandem language learning program, a scheme to pair up language learners to support each other, but she has not yet been assigned a partner after one semester. Wen approached several student organizations at the freshmen student organizations fair, and receives no reply. In order to maximize learning opportunities, study abroad office or program may consider communicating with other organizations to collaboratively provide a wide range of chances to engage international students.

The second implication is the importance of providing longitudinal service to help learners develop communicative and cultural strategies. I resonate with Jackson's advocacy in providing pre-, during and post-trip service and guidance to study abroad students (Jackson, 2006). It is vital for not only students but also programs to understand that study abroad is not a momentary experience but a life-long learning opportunity. While many programs offer pre-departure training and during trip service, mentorship for returnees is lacking. More light should be shed on how to scaffold returnees to mediate further learning with assistance of their sojourn experience.

More importantly, programs are advised to spare more efforts to help learners develop strategies and skills to solve problems when encountering different cultures and communities (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2006). Chinese ancient philosopher Lao Tzu once said, *授之于鱼，不如授之于渔*， meaning *Give a man a*

fish, feed him a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime. During sojourn, learners can expect to encounter all kinds of problems and different challenges. If programs, in collaboration with instructors, can provide services to help learners develop skills, it will better prepare learners for the overseas endeavors and beyond.

For instructors

Last but not least, pedagogical implications for instructors are three-fold. The first one is the importance of interacting with learners to facilitate their use of mediational materials. As mentioned above, learners' interacting with instructors plays a central role in their mediated learning through materials. Dani's use of the psychology textbook could not have been successful without her consultancy with the professor. Similarly, Shan would not have developed her writing skills without her writing professor Alyssa teaching her how to utilize the writing samples and concepts. Both professors listened to the students, made an effort to truly understand their challenges and provided additional scaffolding. When Swain and her colleagues were uncovering the secrets of Mona's success in learning English, one salient account is her father's role as a teacher to mediate her use of a grammar book (Swain et. al., 2010). Well (1999b) argues that artifacts that instructors provide to students may not always be the best or the most suitable ones. However, instructors can make better decisions by understanding their students better and to interact with students so as to transform teaching from a transmission teaching to dialogic teaching. I hope this study can enlighten instructors to understand that scaffold

learning does not cease at giving students a book to read. Instructors' interaction, instruction and direction to the learners are equally important in cultivating development.

The second implication for instructors is mediated instruction in class. Several examples in this report demonstrate effective teaching in class, such as presentation tasks where instructors associate *scientific concepts* with students' *everyday concepts* (Swain et al., 2010) and David's extra tutoring to Shan to help her improve listening skills. Other participants also share that practicality in instructional activities are most useful for them. Sociocultural scholars suggest that effective instruction involves instructors' engagement to observe individuals' engagement in tasks, to provide them with affordances, to observe individuals' utilization of these affordances and to provide scaffolding feedback (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 226). It is worth noting that real-life applicable tasks can help boost the learners' confidence. Several participants in this study reported memorable incidents in their study abroad that were valuable in establishing their self-confidence. If instructors can assess students' actual level, detect the potential in their learning, design some tasks that would allow them to make the knowledge leap, ZPD would occur and learners' self confidence as well as academic goals can be achieved.

The third pedagogical implication for instructors is to understand students as people in relation to their individual differences such as personality, cultural background and learning strategies (Kang & Pyun, 2013). In a study on Chinese language learners' strategy use and achievement, Sung (2009) conclude that learners' use of strategies differ according to their home language/culture, number of foreign language studied, social network, personality, life experience and so forth. Understanding learners as individuals

within a broader historical context instead of class-based performance may be more effective for instructors to evaluate students' learning abilities, to discover similarities and divergence, to detect their learning trajectory and to adapt teaching. Sociocultural scholars believe that, as we use artifacts to change the world, in return they change us (Swain et al., 2010). This process will not only make changes to teaching, but also mediates instructors' own learning and transforms themselves into better educators.

7.4. Limitations

Limitations in this study include lack of written journals from the learners, insufficient observations of participants' out-of-class interactions and lack of perspectives from people around them.

Even though I requested written journals from the participants as supporting data, they explained that they did not have any written journals because of two main reasons: (1) they were too buried in the heavy study load to have any time for journaling. Especially for those who were still in the ESL programs, they all reported that they barely had enough time for sleeping and hanging out with friends, not to mention journaling. (2) They stated that in the technology savvy generation, they are much more inclined to post short updates on social media like Wechat and WhatsApp instead of writing journals. I did collect their social media post and discovered that most of the posts were one to two sentences long and mainly about food, cultural events and traveling. While this posting did provide me with more information about their daily life as a sojourner, it did not provide detailed account of their mediated learning. Oral reflection was the main source

of data for this study. Individuals' self reports were based on their memories; in other words, they shared with me what they remembered. Keightley (2010) pointed out the possible drawback of remembering:

Remembering, whether involving individual, social or cultural representation of the past, is a process which involves selections, absences and multiple, potentially conflicting accounts. (p.59)

Thus, a limitation of this study lies in that participants' remembered experience may not accurately or thoroughly reflect the actual experience at that moment.

The second limitation is that observation could have been more exhaustive. I was given more access to in-class observation than out-of-class observation in this study. Moreover, in-class observation outweighs out-of-class in this study. I observed Yang's part-time work for several times and several campus events where Ben, Kang and Jian attended; however, it would have been more helpful if I had expanded my out-of-class observations with other participants because out-of-class activities could be a good opportunity for me to capture their interaction with friends and local communities. Unlike in-class activities, without a direct tie with academic achievement during out-of-class interaction, these participants may demonstrate more desire to communicate with others.

The last limitation is lack of perspectives from members of the L2 culture on the participants, such as their professors, host families, US friends and colleagues. Because of Ben's active role in international office and his presentations on Chinese cultures, he is fairly well known on campus. I did have multiple conversations with some L2 members about Ben's engagement in the community, but it was not a formal interview. My efforts

were spent more on learners' narratives and observations, but I may have been able to capture more nuances if I had formally interviewed other people who interacted with the participants.

7.5. Suggestions for future research

This research process generated many meaningful and interesting questions for further investigation. However, in order to maintain the research questions as the focus of this study, I had to set aside some equally thought-provoking questions for future research:

(1) A longitudinal study is suggested, funding and time permitting, to explore the development of participants' mediated learning. The third tenet of sociocultural theory is to adopt developmental analysis to examine learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1996). A longitudinal study could allow researchers to be with learners for more sufficient time to observe developments and change of mediation.

(2) Research on contradictions in mediated learning is suggested. During the data analysis, I detected some contradictions in participants' learning. For instance, there was inconsistency between their beliefs and their behaviors. Despite the belief that interacting with native-speaking interlocutors is the ideal way to learn, they do not practice what they believe. Another example is how they view stereotypes. On one hand, they are offended to be stereotyped; on the other hand, they stereotype members of other cultures. It is normal to have conflicts and contradictions in learning. I would be interested in

further exploring what role contradictions play in mediated learning. How contradictions foster or impede learning? Is contradiction a mediational tool and how does it mediate?

(3) Research on teachers' role in mediated learning is suggested. This research presented several inspiring examples of how professors scaffolded the participants to foster learning. It inspires me to conduct a future study with sole focus on teachers: How do the concepts of mediation and mediated learning influence on their understanding of teaching? How do teachers adapt teaching to address learners' individual differences? How do teachers view differential instructions to support international students?

(4) Critical lens to research the role of power in mediated learning is also suggested. When discussing identities and motivation in this study, some participants' reported that they sometimes are offended by American biased reports and public views on China. The authoritative and powerful image of America is detrimental to their feelings and thus reduces their motivation to learn English and American cultures because of their pride as a Chinese. Numerous studies show that "socially constructed categories of gender, race and class are relevant for elective L2 learning in that they affect foreign language learners' investments, desires and identity negotiations in a number of important ways" (Ortega, 2009, p. 247). It would be important to investigate the intricate relationships between power, identities, investment, motivation and learning.

7.6. Conclusion

The concept of traveling abroad has a very long history. There is a famous ancient Chinese saying 读万卷书, 行万里路 meaning *To become wise, you need to read ten*

thousand books and walk ten thousand miles. Over the centuries, people have traveled abroad for various reasons: residence, profession, marriage, tourism, spirituality and so forth. Among all the reasons, education is a main driving force for people to travel tens of thousands of miles. As a sojourner myself, I believe that study abroad is not *one trip* to experience novelty, but a *life long journey* to learn about diversity, about cultures, about self and about how to learn. As such, increasing scholarship sheds more light on the study abroad research.

The benefits of study abroad are debatable: some scholars assume that study abroad provides language learners with considerable language contact with local communities and thus contributes to second language acquisition (Bacon, 2002; Collentine & Freed, 2004), while others argue that cultural shock in a study abroad context causes anxiety and complex emotions which negatively influence learners' language development (Allen & Herron, 2003; Ball, 2000). Even though there is extensive research on study abroad, many studies adopt quantitative, survey-based methods; most studies involve English-speaking students going abroad to learn other languages while not much light is shed on Asian students, Chinese students in particular, and their study abroad in western countries; relatively little research probes into the participants' *own perspectives* of their study abroad process, "the actual experiences and perspectives of learners living in a foreign country, removed from their home culture and immersed in the target language" (Pellegrino, 1998, p. 91). There is limited discussion on how students perceive their own language and cultural gains, or how they utilize available materials and opportunities to

communicate with local people towards their language learning and cultural adjustment. The knowledge gap piqued my interest in further exploring this topic.

The purpose of this study is to examine ten Chinese students' mediated language and cultural learning experience during their study abroad in the Midwest region of U.S.. Data report that students used not one, or two but multiple resources to mediate learning. Mediational tools include menus, textbooks, online resources; semiotic systems include language, email communication and peer review. Interacting with others through dialogues and private speech with self stood out as powerful mediation. Data also reveal that emotions, identities and motivation play a crucial role in mediation. Findings in this case study are consistent with the essential sociocultural argument that learning and development are inseparable from learners' historical, social and cultural contexts. Human beings learn through mediational means and interactions with others (Lantolf, 2000; Swain et. al, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1996). Mediational tools and signs work concurrently to influence learning; mediated learning is a holistic and sophisticated experience.

Data also presented the intricate connection between language and culture learning simultaneously. As McDevitt (2004) argues, human nature is inseparable from culture, and learning an L2 is also learning the culture of another people. Ben's learning of professional culture through using the acronym *FYI*, Jian's learning of cultural connotation through the word *interesting*, Ju's learning of communication culture through using open-questions in her presentations, these examples show that language and culture learning occur simultaneously and influence each other. One aspect may be more obvious

than the other, but they both can be identified. The research process documented many examples of language and culture learning, and those that demonstrated higher mental development were selected as data for discussion in this paper.

This study places learners as the center of research and qualitative methodology elicits learners' perspectives on how mediated learning occurs in relation to the tools they adopt, and interaction they practice with others and self. Results are illuminating to various stakeholders involved in the study abroad field. For program management, it is important to consider how to provide a holistic and life-long-inspiring experience for learners. Training, guidance and mentorship should run through the entire study abroad journey *and beyond*. How to utilize study abroad experience as mediational tools for future development should be another equally important topic worth scholarly attention. For educators, this study enlightens the importance of various pedagogies to address individual differences and the significance of understanding students as people within a broader social, cultural and historical context. Last but not least, this study stresses the importance of reflexivity within learners. Understanding that all higher mental processes are mediated and strategically adopting suitable tools to mediate learning would be impactful on an individual's growth as a learner and person. I hope this research can contribute to the knowledge base of study abroad, and inform efforts to produce more rigorous programs, to train inspiring educators and to nurture reflective learners.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Hello, my name is Kaishan Kong and I am a PhD candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota. I am writing to invite you to join my research study on international students' mediated language and cultural learning experiences in study abroad settings.

As a former international student myself, I am very interested in knowing your stories and your learning experience. What do you find useful in helping you learn the language and culture? Why do you use these materials and how do you use them?

This study will be very interesting and significant in several aspects: (1) You will make new friends with other international students from mainland China to exchange your thoughts and experience. (2) You will have an opportunity to reflect on your own learning strategies and learn other useful strategies from each other through focus group interviews. (3) Your perspectives will be illuminating to professors and professionals to improve instructions and service to international students. (4) Your experience may be very helpful for future international students on how to maximize their learning abroad experience.

I hope you can participate in my study and please feel free to let me know if you have any questions. I would be happy to tell you more about the study.

Thank you.

Kaishan Kong

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您好，我叫孔凯珊，是明尼苏达大学课程与教学系的博士候选人。我正在研究国际学生在海外留学的语言和文化学习经历，希望邀请您的参与。

作为海外留学的过来人，我对你的留学经历非常感兴趣。有什么资源对你的语言和文化学习有帮助？你为什么使用这些资源和如何使用这些资源都是我非常感兴趣的。

这个研究项目非常有趣，也非常有意义，因为：1.你有机会和其他来自中国大陆的同学交朋友，可以互相交流互相帮助；2.你将有机会反思自己的学习经历，总结对自己有用的学习方法，也可以从和别人的交流中学习更多有用的学习策略；3.你的经历和观点会给老师和项目负责人很好的启发，让他们的教学更有效，也可以提高留学项目和国际学生的服务；4. 你的经历可以给未来的留学生借鉴，帮助他们更充分地利用海外留学机会，得到更多的收获。

我希望您能参与我的研究，如果您有任何问题请尽管提出来，我会很乐意向你提供更多信息。我的电话是：952-846-8875. 邮箱是：kongx157@umn.edu

非常感谢！

孔凯珊

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1st interview (beginning of the study)

(for all participants)

1. Can you tell me a little bit of yourself?
 - Which city are you from in China?
 - Is it your first time abroad? If not, where have you been to before?
 - What languages do you speak?
 - How long have you learned English?
 - What are you studying now?
 - How long have you been to the United States and Minnesota?
2. What made you decide to study abroad? Did anyone influence your decision? If so, who? What did he or she do?
3. Why did you choose Minnesota and the University of Minnesota?
4. What do you want to achieve during your study here?
 - What are your goals in learning?
 - What do you want to learn?

(for newly arrived students)

5. What are your expectations for language learning during your study abroad experience?
6. What types of experiences do you imagine will benefit your English language learning in America? Please give examples.

7. Who do you think will be your friends here? What do you plan to do to make friends?
8. Do you plan to travel in the United States? If so, what do you want to gain from the trips? If not, please explain why you don't plan to do so.
9. Do you think your understanding of American cultures will be changed and why in either way?
10. What have you done to prepare yourself for this/these trip/s?
11. What challenges will you foresee in the trip? How do you plan to address these challenges?

(for those who have studied here for a period of time)

12. How do you want to achieve your goals?
 - How have you been learning English in Minnesota?
 - What materials have helped you?
 - Who do you learn English from?
13. How do you learn about culture in Minnesota?
 - Please use examples to tell me some of the cultural knowledge that you have learned.
 - How did you know that? Who taught you? What helped you learn that?
14. Who do you often hang out with? Why do you hang out with them? What have you learned from these people?
15. What activities do you find useful for your language and culture learning? Please share some examples and stories.

16. Please use examples to tell me what you have learned in class and how you have been able to learn in class. What has and hasn't worked for you?

17. Can you give me some examples of what you have learned out-of-class?

2nd interview (at the end of the study)

These are general questions but I also asked customized follow-up questions for each participant based on the observation notes and the first interview data.

1. How do you feel about your study abroad experience?
2. Please use examples to explain how this study abroad experience matches up with your expectations.
3. What are some of the highlights of your study in the United States?
(probe: What were some of the fun stories/ embarrassing moments/significant learning moments/ trips?)
4. Who helped you with your English language learning? How did these people help you?
(probe: teacher, classmates, local communities)
5. What materials did you use to learn English language and culture? How did you use these materials? Please use examples to explain how useful these materials were for you.
6. Did you make many friends? Who are they? How did you make these friends? Were they impactful for your language learning and cultural understanding? Please give examples.

7. Please tell me about your trips to _____. Were there any interesting stories and memorable moments for your language learning and cultural understanding?
8. How do you describe America and American people based on your experience?
9. How did you feel about your study abroad experience so far? Why do you think you had such feelings?
10. Do you think you prepared yourself well for the experience? Please explain.
11. What challenges did you have in language learning and cultural adaptation? How did you solve the problems? Who or what helped you? Please give examples.
12. How have you changed?
13. How have you stayed the same?
14. What will you do differently when you go back to China?

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

* About self

-What kind of learners are you? (independent? social?)

你觉得自己是什么类型的学习者?/你是怎么学习的?

-How do you describe your learning attitudes and learning styles?

你怎么样描述你自己的学习态度和学习方式?

-How do you feel about Chinese language and Chinese culture while you are in the U.S.?

你来到美国后,对中文和中国文化有什么看法?

-What changes have you seen in yourself? How did that change happen? How do you feel about your changes?

你觉得来美国留学后自己有什么变化? 这些变化是怎么发生的?你对自己的变化感觉如何?

-How did you picture your trip to the U.S. before you came here?

你来美国之前对这次留学经历有什么憧憬?

* Language learning

-What are some differences between learning in China and in the U.S.?

你觉得在美国和在中国学习有什么不一样和一样的地方?

-How do you learn English in this different environment and system?

你在这两种环境下是怎么学习英语的?

-What are your challenges in language learning? what are your strategies?

你学习英语有什么困难和挑战?你有什么方法和策略?

-In learning English, what helps you? How does that help you?

有什么资料/方法能帮助你学习英语? 是怎么帮助你的?

* Cultural learning

-Do you notice any cultural practice/values/perspectives after you arrive in the U.S.?

How are they different from your original background? How did you notice these differences?

你来到美国后观察到什么文化现象,包括文化行为,风俗习惯,价值观和看法等? 他们和你的背景有什么异同? 你是怎么得到这些结论的?

-Who/what helps you learn about American cultures?

有什么资源/东西/人帮助你认识和了解美国文化?

-Give me one example of you feeling frustrated/happy/proud/challenged/questioned in the U.S.. Tell me the story/experience, why did you feel this way? What did you do afterwards? (They can pick any emotion).

请回忆一下,并分享一段曾经让你感到沮丧/开心/感动/自豪/困惑的经历? 你当时什么感受?事情后来怎么结局?

* About community

-Who do you like to hang out with? In what circumstances? What do you learn from people around you? Examples.

你平时和什么人交往? 在什么环境下和他们一起? 你从他们身上学习到什么?

-How do you feel when you hang out with your Chinese friends? Why do you feel this way? What do you learn/gain from them? Pros and cons?

当你和中国朋友一起的时候,你有什么感受?你为什么会有这种感受?你从他们身上学到了什么东西?经常和中国同学一起会有什么利和弊吗?

-How do you feel when you hang out with other non-Chinese friends? Who are they?

How did you know them? What do you do together? What have you gained/learned?

Examples.

你和非中国同学交往的时候有什么感受?他们是谁?你是怎么认识他们的?你们经常一起做什么呢?你从他们身上能学到什么东西呢?请举例说明.除了上课以外,你还参加什么课外活动或者团体吗?为什么?你有什么收获?

-How do you like your classes? What is your favorite class and why? What is your least favorite class and why? What activities are most helpful to you and why? Examples.

你喜欢你的课吗?你最喜欢的课是什么?为什么你最喜欢?你最不喜欢的课是什么?为什么?什么课堂活动对你最有帮助?为什么?请举例.

*** Mediated learning**

-How do you understand the concept of mediated learning?

你是怎么理解协调性学习?

-What tools/opportunities are helping you learn English language and cultures? Give examples to explain how you used them and how helpful they are.

有什么工具/机会帮助你学习英语和文化?请举例说明这些资源是如何帮助你的?你是如何使用的?

-How do you mediate your own learning?

你如何主动寻找机会学习?